PROPAGANDA AND PERSUASION IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

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Overview

The term propaganda is frequently understood to be an activity that can be relegated either to history or to non-democratic ‘enemy’ states and actors. For example, the term often conjures up images of World War II (WWII) Nazi activities headed by Joseph Goebbels or the demonisation of Germans and Japanese during US and British WWII propaganda campaigns. In the contemporary context, when talking of enemies, any given political actor will frequently dismiss their media output and claims as propaganda. As an activity, however, that is inherently geared towards persuasion and influence through some kind of manipulation, propaganda is not always clearly distinguishable from many, although not necessarily all, of the activities that Western academics and practitioners label in more benign terms. These include perception management, psychological operations (psy ops), public diplomacy, public affairs and strategic communication. In fact, scholars such as Philip Taylor, a leading historian on the subject of war and propaganda, have little patience for the use of these alternative labels:

Let us first dispel with the euphemistic nonsense that surrounds this topic and which does in fact obscure what we are actually talking about – namely propaganda. … an entire euphemism industry has developed to deflect attention away from the realities of what they do, ranging from ‘spin doctoring’ and ‘public affairs’ at the political level to ‘international information’ and ‘perception management’ at the military level. … despite the euphemism game, democracies have grown ever more sophisticated at conducting propaganda, however labeled, which only they deny to be propaganda in the first place.

(Taylor 2002: 20)

In this chapter we adopt Taylor’s position and employ the term propaganda to describe the variety of activities today employed in order to persuade people and influence behaviour. Of course, this position is not uncontroversial, as many believe that propaganda is an activity distinct from ‘strategic communication’ or ‘public relations (PR)’ and it is necessary to be clear on our reasoning for this choice. First, the term propaganda, understood as a strategy of persuasion
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involving some level of manipulation, is in fact the historical term used to describe activities now frequently referred to as PR or strategic communication. Here it is worth remembering that, in the early twentieth century, the term propaganda carried few negative connotations. However, its extensive use during World War I (WWI) increased awareness of its manipulative nature and led to a drive by advocates of propaganda to ‘rebrand’: Edward Bernays (founding father of PR) stated that: ‘propaganda got to be a bad word because of the Germans ... using it [during WW1]. So what I did was to ... find some other words. So we found the words Counsel on Public Relations’. A contemporary expression of this approach in PR scholarship is Grunig and Hunt’s influential four models of PR. As Moloney notes, these set out four categories of PR, three of which involve propagandistic or manipulative communication. The fourth category – non-propagandistic symmetrical two-way communication – ‘has taken hold in many universities ... to over-emphasise PR as a practice of virtuous messaging, known as two-way communications between equal, listening, negotiating, mutually respectful message senders and receivers’. Adoption by many PR scholars of Grunig and Hunt’s two-way symmetrical model as representative of contemporary PR activities presents a distorted view of reality. Moloney is scathing when he writes that it takes ‘the PR academy into a neverland of perfection’. Second, we contend that most of the activities described as public relations or strategic communication do in fact involve some level of manipulation that are consistent with nearly all historical and contemporary definitions of propaganda. Certainly, ‘PR’ activities in the realm of war and conflict often involve manipulation (for example through deception via omission, distortion or, in extreme cases, lying). Using terms such as ‘PR’ or strategic communication perpetuates an inaccurate and misleading impression that these persuasion activities are largely free from manipulation.

We do argue that, as a field, persuasion studies need to grapple more effectively with understanding non-manipulative forms of persuasion, as well as mapping the variety of ways that persuasion can become manipulative. Neither those who use terms such as PR, nor those who employ the term propaganda, have really got to grips with this and we explore this at the end of the chapter. We argue that there is a real need for a clearer conceptualisation of those propagandistic forms that are highly manipulative – namely, those entailing deception and/or coercion. This is an important point because, by identifying deception and coercion as important propagandistic forms, this enables us to appreciate the scale and scope of contemporary manipulative propaganda. It is only through such recognition that scholars can take the next critical steps. These would entail a) mapping out how persuasion could work through less manipulative means; and b) articulating those circumstances where deception is necessary, but also how and when deception should be exposed. While these critical steps are beyond the scope of this introductory chapter, a detailed exposition can be found elsewhere (Bakir et al. 2015; Herring and Robinson 2014).

With these points in mind, this chapter provides an introduction to propaganda in relation to war and conflict. In particular, we see this area of study as being renewed at this point in time, with increasing attention from academics (e.g. Bakir et al. 2015; Jowett and O’Donnell 2012; Moloney 2006) to the field of propaganda. In this sense, propaganda is a ‘new old’ subject area. We start by outlining the importance of these activities to the contemporary generation of policymakers and noting also the relevance and significance of deception as a political strategy. We then map three distinct areas in which propaganda plays a key role in conflict: 1) influencing domestic opinion; 2) shaping international/global opinion; and 3) ‘winning hearts and minds’ within conflict zones. The chapter concludes by specifying key areas in which further conceptual/theoretical, ethical and empirical research are necessary in order to further our understanding of the role of propaganda in contemporary society.
The importance and relevance of propaganda (and deception) today

Whether one wishes to call it strategic communication, perception management or propaganda, these activities aimed at influence and persuasion are of profound importance to the political sphere, especially so when it comes to war and conflict. For example, in the US context, Bennett et al. describe how, for the Bush administration, public affairs firmly established itself as a new form of governing with the ‘malleable and subordinate nature of reality, the elastic human capacity to perceive it, and the mechanisms used to shape it’ meaning that, to policymakers, ‘narratives matter more than material reality’ (Bennett et al. 2007: 136–137). In turn, narratives shape perceptions of reality that ‘open the way to the use of power to create those realities’ (Bennett et al. 2007: 137). Bennett et al.’s interview with independent journalist Ron Suskind provides evidence of this mentality; Suskind quotes a senior administration official:

We’re an empire now, and when we act we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.

(Bennett et al. 2007: 138)

In the UK context, in part flowing from the Labour Party’s bitter experience with a hostile right-wing British press, the Blair government (1997–2007) was focused on public relations. Indeed, the reputation of the Blair government for spin has been widely documented and discussed (e.g. Franklin 2003). Recently, Blair’s Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, published his memoirs, titled The New Machiavelli: how to wield power in the modern world, in which he devotes a full chapter to detailing their approach to dealing with media. With Director of Communications and Strategy Alastair Campbell in charge, Powell states ‘we needed a proactive media operation that not just responded to stories, but created them’ (Powell 2010: 193). Finally, an important insight into the extent to which concern over public relations had increased in the years running up to the Iraq invasion is provided by an MI6 officer during the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq war. When asked about the presence of Campbell during briefings from MI6, he notes that

[p]ost 1997, the culture, disciplines, attitudes of HMG [Her Majesty’s Government] went through phases of profound change. It wouldn’t have happened before, closer to the Cold War … I think it’s difficult for the Chief to say, ‘[c]an I have a private word, Prime Minister. I can’t do it in front of Campbell’.

To the extent that the notion of propaganda is often understood to entail a suggestion of deception, it is necessary to briefly discuss the importance of the latter phenomenon to politics. Political deception, in fact, has a long pedigree and has been a perennial concern as far back as Ancient Greece and includes Plato’s The Republic and Aristotle’s On Rhetoric (Bakir et al. 2017; Corner 2007). For some scholars and practitioners, deception is frequently a matter of necessity, especially in the challenging and dangerous realm of international politics and conflict. For example, in his work Why Leaders Lie, Mearsheimer (2011) describes how lying is frequent in the realm of international politics and, counter-intuitively, argues that leaders lie to their own publics more frequently than they do to other leaders. He argues that the threatening realm of international politics demands that leaders sometimes lie for reasons...
of state, but also notes how leaders of liberal democratic states lie when their behaviour falls short of liberal ideological claims regarding the law-abiding and war-averse nature of liberal democracies (2011: ch. 7). Harking back to Plato’s ‘noble lie’, he also notes how nationalist myths designed to foster a cohesive state frequently involve lies and half-truths (Mearsheimer 2011: 75).

Others see deception as a more fundamental ‘reality’ to the demands of governance and social stability. For example, the elitist writings of Leo Strauss represent a twentieth century manifestation of Plato’s critique of democracy and the associated claim that governance by the wise is preferable to rule by the majority (Strauss 1975; see also Strauss 1958). Plato’s advocacy of ‘the noble lie’ was based upon the idea that, in order to maintain harmony in the context of a social hierarchy, myths needed to be created in order to help people accept their location in the hierarchy: God made some to rule (the golden race), others to build (iron and bronze workers) and still others to fight (soldiers). Many see in Strauss the continuation of the Platonic idea that democratic politics is too idealistic and that the greater good can only be achieved by deferring to wise and enlightened elites. Strauss’s concern is that, at times, the truth would threaten political stability and, consequently, deception becomes essential to political order and stability. Strauss has come to be associated with, and deployed by, those making anti-democratic and elitist arguments, most recently in the neoconservative movement in the US (for analysis of this use see Norton 2005), though such use of his work has been disputed (Smith 1997; Zuckert and Zuckert 2006). Mearsheimer (2011: 60) quotes the leading neoconservative Irving Kristol:

> There are truths appropriate for children; truths that are appropriate for students; truths that are appropriate for educated adults; and truths that are appropriate for highly educated adults, and the notion that there should be one set of truths for everyone is a fallacy of modern day democracy, it simply does not work.

*(Cited in Bailey 1997)*

Of course, not all propaganda is the same and it is certainly true that there exist wide variations between propaganda involving outright lying and that which involves less blunt forms of manipulation such as half-truths and exaggerations and pointedly one-sided presentations of the truth. At the same time, to the extent that all of these activities are frequently aimed at persuasion via some degree of manipulation, the issue is essentially one of a continuum and, as some propaganda experts explain it, the essential difference is between *White* forms of propaganda, involving selective and biased narratives, and *Black* forms involving outright deceit. As Jowett and O’Donnell (2012: 26) put it: ‘propaganda thus runs the gamut from truth to deception. It is, at the same time, always value laden and ideology laden. The means vary from a mild slanting of information to outright deception’. White Propaganda:

> …is what one hears on Radio Moscow and V[oice] O[f] A[merica] during peacetime. Although what listeners hear is reasonably close to the truth, it is presented in a manner that attempts to convince the audience that that the sender is the ‘good guy’ with the best ideas and political ideology … National celebrations, with their overt patriotism and regional chauvinism, can usually be classified as white propaganda. … Black propaganda is when the source is concealed or credited to a false authority and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions. Black propaganda is the ‘big lie’ including all types of creative deceit.

*(Jowett and O’Donnell 2012: 17)*
Whether these current definitions and conceptualisations are adequate is a matter that we will return to in the final section of this chapter. Now, we turn to providing an overview of three key ways in which propaganda, and various forms of deception and coercion, are employed in relation to conflict.

**Propaganda and conflict**

**Mobilising populations for war**

Subject to extensive scholarly attention (e.g. Brewer 2009; Cull 1995; Taylor 2003) the role of propaganda in mobilising populations for war is perhaps one of its most important roles vis-à-vis war and conflict. Historically, such propaganda campaigns frequently involved demonisation of the official enemy and, for example, WW1 and WWII propaganda posters would often portray Germany as a savage monster or gorilla, focused on global destruction. Other components of early twentieth century propaganda campaigns also frequently involved atrocity stories, both real and imagined, designed to simultaneously highlight the depravity of the enemy and the moral superiority of 'our' side. Indeed, exploitation of actual atrocities, such as the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* in 1915 by a German U-boat, have often been a critical part of persuading populations to support war. The RMS *Lusitania* carried almost 2000 civilians, although it was also carrying armaments, and its sinking caused a groundswell of international opinion against Germany, contributing to the eventual entry of the US into the war. The exploitation of the event as propaganda involved downplaying/denying the military cargo of the ship and highlighting its civilian passengers. Naturally, appeal to patriotism has frequently been a cornerstone of wartime propaganda. Also, fabricated/exaggerated attacks have been a key part of propaganda strategies aimed at achieving war. For example, immediately prior to WWII, Germany staged a bogus attack on a German radio station to use as a pretext for invading Poland (Mearsheimer 2011: 79–80) whilst, during the Vietnam War, false or inaccurate claims regarding an attack on a US warship by North Vietnam were used to mobilise support from the US Congress for a major escalation of US involvement in Vietnam (Alterman 2004; Mearsheimer 2011: 47).

Today, many academics researching this area tend to present state attempts at mobilisation in more benign terms and, in particular, the phrase *strategic narratives* has come into use (e.g. Miskimmon et al. 2013). In some of this new literature the focus is on how effective any given narrative is and with a tendency to present such propaganda efforts as attempts at reasonable and rational argumentation in favour of a war. So, for example, Ringsmose and Borgesen (2011) analyse how successful the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO’s) strategic narratives have been vis-à-vis maintaining public support for war in Afghanistan and the focus is on how successful messaging involves articulating ‘a clear and compelling mission purpose … promise of wartime success … [and a] coherent and consistent [message]’ (2011: 513–514). However, even if it is the case that contemporary ‘strategic communication’ or ‘public affairs’ campaigns appear less crude and emotive than those of earlier eras, it certainly is also the case that it retains some of the features, discussed above, of propaganda activities from earlier eras. For example, in the run-up to the 1991 Gulf War, the PR firm Hill and Knowlton arranged for a Kuwaiti woman to lie to a US Congressional Committee that she had witnessed Iraqi soldiers removing babies from incubators and left them to die (MacArthur 1992: 58–59). The false testimony (the actual occurrence of such an event has never been independently verified, see Mannheim 1994) from a young
woman who turned out to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the US, was clearly employed in order to further demonise Saddam Hussein’s regime and build support for military action (see also Bennett and Paletz 1994). Other notable examples of recent wartime propaganda, this time aimed at maintaining public support for an ongoing war, was the case of Jessica Lynch during the 2003 Iraq War. In this instance, the true story of a US soldier injured in an ambush, and then treated by Iraqi medics who then attempted to hand her back to US forces was manipulated and distorted into a dramatic story. The narrative was about her fighting to the last bullet (she never fired a shot) and then being valiantly rescued in a night-time helicopter rescue under enemy fire (there was no resistance and no Iraqi forces present at the hospital) (Robinson et al. 2010: 132–140). Finally, the way in which US and UK governments went about building support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, by publicising intelligence-based allegations of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) production, has become a seminal example of highly manipulative, even deceptive, propaganda being used in order to mobilise populations in support of war. Herring and Robinson (2014) argue that British officials engaged in intentional deception when producing a dossier, for public consumption, which suggested that the intelligence was certain that Iraq possessed current WMD, whilst Mearsheimer (2011) argues that both the US and UK British governments actually lied to their publics on multiple occasions regarding alleged Iraqi WMD.

Overall, whether propaganda campaigns are in support of righteous or nefarious wars, whether they are focused on appeals to patriotism, horror of enemy atrocities or based upon wilful distortions and deceptions, accurate, unbiased and propaganda-free communication is a scarce resource when states go to war. As the well worn phrase states: in war the first casualty is truth. It is also the case that, as a general rule, domestic populations can be easily susceptible to propaganda emanating from their own governments (see Robinson 2015). For example, few Americans in the early years of the ‘war on terror’ questioned official propaganda narratives and many accepted inaccurate suggestions such as the one that Saddam Hussein was involved with orchestrating 9/11 (Milbank and Deane 2003).

Going global: ‘public diplomacy’ and soft power

Propaganda has never just been about states and their populations; it has also been a major part of the process by which states project power on the global stage. Indeed, according to some scholars of propaganda, ideological struggles such as that of the Cold War were won and lost according to who possessed the most persuasive propaganda: ‘Democratic propaganda has always relied upon credibility and credible truths for its effectiveness. That is what “won” the Cold War—that other monumental struggle for hearts and minds that took almost 50 years—two generations—for western ideals and values to prevail’ (Snow and Taylor 2006: 401).

Of course, as Taylor has noted elsewhere, the issue of ‘truth’ is probably more accurately understood as ‘our’ ‘Western’ truth. In any case, propaganda has clearly been understood by great powers as being a key component of exercising power and influence and is frequently referred to as public diplomacy. In recent years these battles for global public opinion, and the propaganda association with them, have occasionally been conflated with Joseph Nye’s (1990) notion of soft power (Miskimmon et al. 2013). This concept refers to non-coercive (and non-military) approaches to projecting power and influence in the world. In some ways, this conflation is misleading. The original emphasis with the notion of soft power was on the inherent attractiveness of a particular country to other people and the power and influence that that supplied. So, for Nye (1990), the US possesses great soft power attraction because many people around the world admired its proclaimed democracy and freedom. Propaganda,
of course, suggests that a far more active process is in play whereby there are continual and systematic attempts to encourage people to think positively about another country.

Proactive and systematic strategies designed to influence perceptions do, of course, occur and so-called public diplomacy, the favoured term for such global propaganda, has a long history. For example, the US government’s Voice of America first started radio broadcasts in 1942 aimed at promoting democracy and, in time, came to be broadcast in forty-five languages with over 100 million listeners worldwide (Gilboa 1998: 58). In 1953, the United States Information Agency was created in order to ‘coordinate the combat against the spread of communist ideas’ (Taylor 2006: 5). Overall the aim of public diplomacy has been to attempt to influence the citizens of foreign nations in ways conducive to US interests so that they can in turn influence their respective governments accordingly. As Gilboa (1998: 58–67) describes with respect to the US case, public diplomacy, conducted through both media and other fields, including cultural and educational initiatives, has been aimed at long-term influence of target audiences around the world, functioning very much at an ideological level by both promoting values (such as democracy, human rights and capitalism) and attempting to persuade peoples of the world that the USA is the leading example of such values. Similarly, so-called media diplomacy has been more narrowly focused upon both promoting US interests vis-à-vis specific issues and attempting to promote a US agenda throughout the world’s media. So, for example, following the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003, President George Bush alighted upon a US aircraft carrier against a banner that read ‘Mission Accomplished’: it is likely that the event was carefully crafted so as to produce images that offered a symbol of success to the America public and send a powerful signal vis-à-vis US military prowess to the governments and peoples of the world. Similar activities and strategies were employed during the Cold War by the Soviet Union and, today, emerging global powers such as China and India are paying increasing attention to these mechanisms of influence and power projection.

Propaganda aimed at global audiences, then, is just as significant a part of propaganda operations as are those campaigns targeted at domestic audiences. In terms of effectiveness, however, they are likely to be less effective, on balance, than campaigns aimed at domestic audiences. Global/foreign audiences are far more likely to adopt ambiguous or oppositional responses to these propaganda messages. This is in part because they are not already primed to believe these messages: that is, they are coming from a government other than theirs and hence the influences of nationalism and national loyalty are in play in reverse. But it is also because other powerful states are also attempting to project power and influence via their own propaganda efforts. The current global information wars between the US/European Union (EU) and Russia vis-à-vis the Ukraine and Syria, playing out across global news media and social media, are testament to the competing propaganda narratives that are being aggressively promoted. In this contested information environment, success is by no means guaranteed, as one nation’s audience is more readily able to perceive at least some of the deception being aimed at them by foreign nations.

**Targeting foreign audiences in war zones**

Finally, a third significant use of propaganda is in relation to actual combat operations within war zones. So-called information warfare (or information operations) refers to a wide range of activities which include battlefield communication, public communication and intelligence gathering. As a subset of information warfare, psychological warfare and perception management play a key role on the battlefield, especially in the context of counter-insurgency operations. In the
broadest sense, these activities involve ‘influencing the population’s perception of events and the host nation’s legitimacy, as well as insurgent decisions and decision-making processes’. Much of the basic strategy involves co-ordinating and maintaining consistent messages, or narratives, aimed at countering insurgent narratives and propaganda, and draws upon psychological operations, military deception, electronic warfare and other capabilities. These activities include engagement with local and international news media and, beyond that, dissemination of print media such as the NATO newspaper Sada-e Azadi in Afghanistan, advertising (such as the billboard adverts aimed at deterring suicide bombers in Afghanistan), as well as close integration of information operations with counter-insurgency operations. Regarding counter-insurgency operations, communication of key themes and messages is seen as an integral part of operations.

Of course, the effectiveness of these campaigns, compared to propaganda aimed at domestic audiences and global audiences, is relatively limited. In part this is because these audiences are rarely inclined to see things from the point of view of occupying forces. As Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham (2011: 107–8) describe in relation to operations in Afghanistan:

In Iraq and in Afghanistan the Coalition pushed out messages, on specific channels, and hoped to achieve attitudinal change. As we have already seen, in Iraq these messages were focused on supporting the establishment of a democracy whilst in Afghanistan they were designed to build support for the government of Hamid Karzai and the continued presence of NATO and ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] forces. … it did not take into consideration that the audience themselves may already have held preconceived views about Karzai, GIRoA [Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan] and ISAF, views that might contextualise their attitudes and behaviours … In short, the audience was not already buying into the coalition message – in Afghanistan it was not a straight binary decision between the Taliban (let’s not forget they are someone’s father, brother, son) and ISAF … In Iraq, the same binary offer existed, and here too the Iraqis refused to accept it. For them it was not a straight choice between elements of Saddam’s former Ba’ath party and a new Western-supported government. Many Iraqis were simply not convinced by either …

The second limiting factor concerns the degree of control over the information environment. At least when it comes to domestic audiences in the West, there exists a greater degree of certainty compared to war zones such as Afghanistan as to the channels through which most of the public receive at least some of their news and information about the world. Although traditional news providers have, in the digital era, become increasingly concerned about the lack of loyalty of audiences, and especially younger generations, to legacy news, in war zones it is even less likely that the intended audience will even be exposed to the foreign propagandist’s message. For example, and again drawing upon Mackay and Tatham’s critique, attempts to introduce media that can be used to influence perceptions meet with an uphill struggle in terms of gaining interest, let alone legitimacy, amongst the population. They describe how the NATO newspaper in Afghanistan involved the production of over 400,000 copies every fortnight but that ‘anecdotally less than 10 per cent reach the intended audience’ whilst many ended up being ‘sold off to locals for wrapping shopping and food in the markets’ (Mackay and Tatham 2011: 285). In a nutshell, audiences here are much more likely to have an oppositional response to the messages being promoted during propaganda campaigns.
It is perhaps for these reasons that propaganda activities within war zones have a significant coercive component to them. For example, ‘information operations’ are closely integrated with counter-insurgency operations, whereby US humanitarian aid and positive messaging are combined with military action and seen as a suitable hybrid approach to ‘winning hearts and minds’ (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2009). Critically, these carrot and stick activities are not seen, by those that devise them, as separate, but as part of an integrated strategy aimed at organising conduct via a communications environment that is inextricably enmeshed with the physical context (Miller and Sabir 2012) including violent acts which largely function to persuade a broader audience. Miller (2015) discusses Commander Steve Tatham, the ‘intellectual lead’ on UK strategic communications, and notes that he: ‘acknowledged that the official view does not see strategic communication as simply a matter of communication itself. Any definition of strategic communication must “recognize”, Tatham wrote, “that the success of non-kinetic effect is amplified by threats of kinetic activity.’ Kinetic, in this context, means the use of force and violence. In short, propaganda in war zones is as much as about communicating threats to ‘target populations’ as it is about selling the claimed benefits of the war that is going on around them.

Conclusion: mapping areas for further research and development

As we have seen, organised approaches to persuasion and influence play an important role in contemporary conflict and do so across domestic, international and local (i.e. combat zone) contexts. In this final section, we wish to identify a number of areas that we believe to be in need of scholarly attention. These concern a) the development of a more rigorous and comprehensive conceptualisation of persuasive communication and propaganda; b) exploring the ways in which propaganda strategies have been adapted to the new Internet-based media environment; and c) greater critical engagement with both practitioners and publics regarding the avoidance of highly manipulative propaganda as well as greater engagement with more democratic forms of persuasion. We shall deal with each in turn.

Conceptualising propaganda and non-manipulative (democratic) persuasive communication

A critical area in which conceptual and theoretical advances are needed concerns our understanding of persuasive communication that involves manipulation, and how this can be distinguished from more consensual and non-manipulative forms. Most scholars who employ the label propaganda presume that it is, by definition, manipulative. Conversely, most scholars who use euphemisms such as strategic communication and public relations presume that these activities are (relatively) free of manipulative techniques such as deception (Bakir et al. 2015). Across both of these literatures very little conceptual work has been done in terms of elaborating precisely the mechanisms by which propaganda manipulates, or theorising what non-manipulative persuasion might look like in practice (see Corner 2007 and Herring and Robinson 2014 for initial steps). A framework that conceptualises both non-manipulative and manipulative forms of persuasive communication would go some considerable way in terms of bridging scholarship on propaganda (which deals with manipulation), Taylor’s ‘euphemism industry’ (which uses terms such as ‘strategic communication’ and ‘public diplomacy’ and tends to avoid critical engagement with issues of manipulation), and aspirations for more democratic and consensual modes of persuasion (see Bakir et al. 2015).
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Important changes in the information environment, underpinned by the convergence of media communication around the Internet and the ubiquity of personal digital communication, means that propaganda strategies have had to adapt (e.g. Hanson 2012; Hayden 2016). In fact, the digital environment has undoubtedly provided new opportunities for political actors to seek to influence and shape conduct and behaviour and, in particular, seems vulnerable to strategies of deception. Examples abound. For instance, exploiting the digital age’s capacity for ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells 2009) is the use of public relations techniques such as the ‘front group’ where vested interests are disguised by ostensibly independent groups. Also, online identities can be assumed and used deceptively – a phenomena known as the ‘sock puppet’ – a fake online persona. Though they can be used playfully, they are also used in economic and political influence strategies by, for example, Stella Artois (Watson 2012) and the Special Operations Command of the US military (Fielding and Cobain 2011). Another example of new propaganda opportunities presented by the digital environment comes from the revelations, in 2013 by whistle-blower Edward Snowden, that British signals intelligence agency, Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), deploys a vast range of operational tools for mass collection and analysis of citizens’ online communications as well as for active deceptive communications. The leaked documents show that GCHQ propaganda unit, the Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group, possesses a wide range of tools that can alter the very fabric of digital communication through online covert action including the publication of fake materials and deceptive content. For instance, ‘CLEAN SWEEP’ is said to be able to ‘Masquerade Facebook Wall Posts for individuals or entire countries’; ‘GATEWAY’ can ‘artificially increase traffic to a website’; and ‘SLIPSTREAM’ can inflate page views on websites. Its ‘techniques’ include: ‘CHANGELING’ which provides the ‘Ability to spoof any email address and send email under that identity’; ‘HAVOK’, a ‘Real-time website cloning technique allowing on-the-fly alterations’; and ‘SPACE ROCKET’, a programme covering insertion of media into target networks (Greenwald 2014; Greenwald and Fishman 2015). While such propaganda is targeted at those defined by the Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group (JTRIG) as ‘terrorists’ or ‘extremists’, intended targets are not, of course, the only recipients in a globally interconnected, digital media environment. This potentially generates unintended consequences as non-target audiences consume the propaganda. Taking deception to the next level, some propagandists actively exploit this permeable boundary. For instance, Briant (2015) shows how post-‘9/11’, in recognition of the fragmentation and global fluidity of audiences, there has been greater Anglo-American coordination in the military’s public affairs and psyops to generate the desired propaganda effect. She shows how the close Anglo-American relationship is used to overcome domestic restrictions in propaganda for purposes of counterterrorism, exploiting the two countries’ different capabilities and the UK’s weaker legislative restrictions on propaganda.

In short, manipulative propaganda involving deception is clearly alive and flourishing in the contemporary new media environment and there is ample work to be done in terms of investigating, mapping and theorising these activities.

**Engaging academics, practitioners and publics**

In many ways we have a weak grasp of the extent to which propaganda shapes the political, social and economic world around us. In part this is because many of those who analyse propaganda do so by exploring historical examples such as WWI, WWII and the Cold
War rather than engaging with contemporary events. In part it is because those who examine contemporary persuasive communication activities do so by largely ignoring the manipulative, propagandistic, dimensions of these activities, a tendency which is reflected in the use of euphemisms such as ‘strategic communication’ and ‘perception management’. This weakness is worrying. The industry underpinning what we have referred to as propaganda is massive (Davis 2013) and impacts across environmental, economic, military, political and cultural spheres. The last fifteen years have also born witness to major Western-led wars, in which propaganda and deception have played key roles and what now, in 2016, appears to be an ever escalating ‘war on terror’ and regional conflagration in the Middle East. The world also faces an uncertain future: global climate change, resource wars and fear of superpower rivalry between the major global states (US, China, Russia etc.) are all major issues and ones in which propaganda and persuasion are playing a central role.

In this context it seems crucial that academics should engage much more directly with the question of how power is being exercised through propagandistic communication. This entails critically analysing the most highly deceptive and manipulative forms of propaganda and, in doing so, engaging with both the public and practitioners of propaganda. For the former an essential task will be to help educate people, the targets of propaganda, so that they are better able to evaluate the veracity of persuasive messages – especially those emanating from their own nation’s propagandists. For the latter, an important task is to help steer producers of persuasive communication toward communication strategies that are non-manipulative and ethically grounded. Ideally, such persuasive communication would avoid all forms of deception and coercion. If deception and coercion are deemed unavoidable and the propaganda is seen as vital to furthering the ‘national interest’ (for instance, a nation faces an unavoidable war and the only way to mobilise the population rapidly enough is through deception), then there should be some form of post-event ethical reckoning. In short, if public opinion and truth matter, and if states and powerful political actors need to be held accountable for their actions, we need much more critical attention to, and research into, propaganda.

Notes

1 SIS4, Chilcot Inquiry, p. 63.
3 For a fuller discussion of these issues see Robinson 2015.

References

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