

PROPAGANDA AS A TOOL FOR FORMING PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS: HISTORICAL ASPECTS AND MODERN CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Propaganda is a powerful tool used to exert targeted influence on mass consciousness. The article analyzes the main theoretical approaches to understanding propaganda, its historical evolution, mechanisms of functioning in various political regimes, as well as modern forms, including digital and algorithmic propaganda. Particular attention is paid to the influence of propaganda on democratic processes, public opinion and behavioral attitudes of individuals.

The article examines the historical evolution of propaganda as a social and political phenomenon. The analysis covers key stages in the development of propaganda — from religious forms in ancient times to mass information campaigns of the 21st century. Particular attention is paid to the institutionalization of propaganda, its ideological functions and technological transformations. The aim of the study is to identify the mechanisms of the influence of propaganda on public consciousness in different historical periods. The article is based on an interdisciplinary approach and includes references to the works of domestic and foreign researchers.

Key words: propaganda, information policy, public consciousness, media, manipulation, digital technologies

Introduction

Propaganda as a phenomenon has existed since ancient times. Its goal is to convince the masses of the correctness of a certain ideology or worldview. In the conditions of the modern information society, propaganda is becoming increasingly sophisticated, relying on the achievements of psychology, cybernetics, sociology and information technology. Modern propaganda can be implicit, disguised as news, entertainment or even educational content.

Propaganda is an integral part of human history, accompanying social, religious and political processes throughout the centuries. As a special form of targeted influence on mass consciousness, propaganda initially emerged in religious, military and political contexts, reflecting the desire of power structures to form, direct and control public opinion. Its evolution is closely linked to the development of communication technologies, changes in forms of government and the complication of socio-political systems.

From the rhetoric of classical orators and the religious messages of the Middle Ages to the sophisticated information campaigns of the 20th century, propaganda has continually adapted to new conditions and challenges. The establishment of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in the 17th century, the activities of military information services during the First World War, the totalitarian

media machines of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and the ideological confrontations of the Cold War era all illustrate the diversity of forms and scales of propaganda influence.

Modern research demonstrates that propaganda is not exclusively a product of authoritarian regimes — it also manifests itself in democratic societies, taking on more sophisticated, technologically supported forms, especially in the digital environment and algorithmically controlled communications. Understanding the historical path of propaganda — from a religious mission to tools of psychological warfare and digital manipulation — allows us to better understand its nature, goals, and mechanisms.

The purpose of this article is to trace the key stages in the historical development of propaganda, to identify the institutional forms of its organization, and to show how it has transformed in response to changes in the political context, technological capabilities, and social expectations. Along with this, the contribution of leading theorists such as Harold Lasswell, Peter Kenez, and David Welch to the formation of a scientific approach to the analysis of propaganda as a phenomenon of mass communication will be considered.

The historical evolution of propaganda

Propaganda as a form of influencing mass consciousness has deep historical roots. Its elements can be traced back to antiquity – in speeches, monumental art and state rhetoric of Rome and Greece. However, the systematic use of propaganda began in the religious sphere, especially during the Counter-Reformation, when the Catholic Church established the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (1622), a body responsible for spreading the Catholic faith and combating Protestantism. The Congregatio de Propaganda Fide is considered one of the first institutional examples of systematic propaganda, created on the initiative of Pope Gregory XV. Its goal was to spread the Catholic faith in response to the Protestant Reformation and to strengthen the position of the Roman Catholic Church throughout the world. The creation of the Congregation reflected the growing need for coordinated and centralized activity of the Catholic Church in the context of increased competition with Protestant teachings, especially in Europe. It was also part of a broader Counter-Reformation strategy aimed at restoring and expanding the influence of the papacy.

In the 20th century, propaganda reached unprecedented scale and technical perfection, especially in totalitarian regimes, where it became an integral part of government. During the First World War, the so-called War Propaganda Bureau was created in Great Britain (1914), which was later renamed the Office of War Information. In France, under the second department of the General Staff of the Ministry of Defense, a department of the Military Propaganda Service was created (1915). Thus, the main task of the military propaganda department was to influence the enemy with the help of leaflets. Each French army had an aircraft for distributing printed materials with information and psychological influence. Both institutions were engaged in disseminating propaganda among the military and civilians of other states. In 1917, a psychological section was created in the United States at the intelligence service of the headquarters of the expeditionary forces. The main means of conducting information warfare at that time were leaflets, postcards, newspapers. The Russian army used loudspeakers as technical means. Other countries, to one degree or another, tried to exert information and psychological influence on the enemy troops and population, but the influence of this influence was significantly inferior to that of England and France. In Germany, until August 1918, it was prohibited to publish and distribute leaflets, since, in the opinion of the country's leadership, this was contrary to the rules of war. Of the informational and psychological influence materials, only the newspaper "Gazette des Ardennes", published in French for the population of the occupied areas, was allowed, which was distributed behind the front line using balloons. When the ban was lifted and Germany began mass publishing leaflets on American, British and French troops, time was lost and it failed to achieve any tangible results before the end of the war. During the World War I, informational and psychological influence was exerted through printed propaganda. The main types of printed propaganda materials were: leaflets, brochures, letters from prisoners of war, postcards, posters, fake ration cards, etc. These materials were distributed using aviation and balloons. One balloon was used to deliver 2kg of printed materials (500 to 1000 copies of leaflets). (Talishinsky, E. 2024. 239-240)

In Nazi Germany, a centralized structure was created - the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda (Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda), headed by Joseph Goebbels. This department coordinated all areas of mass communication - from cinema to printed publications, radio and mass events - with the goal of introducing Nazi ideology into the consciousness of citizens everywhere.

Propaganda in the Third Reich is one of the most studied and vivid examples of the instrumentalization of mass communication for political purposes. The Nazi regime created a unique and powerful system of ideological control, at the center of which was the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda under the leadership of Joseph Goebbels. David Welch in his fundamental work *"The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda"* offers a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms by which the Nazis shaped public consciousness and ensured the political stability of the regime.

Welch emphasizes that the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda was determined not only by its content, but also by the centralized organizational structure that enabled the synchronization of messages across different media channels. "After the Nazi 'seizure of power' in 1933, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels stressed the importance of co-ordinating propaganda with other activities. In a dictatorship, propaganda must address itself to large masses of people and attempt to move them to a uniformity of opinion and action. But the Nazis also understood that propaganda is of little value in isolation". (Welch, D. 1993, 1-15)

Nazi propaganda sought to eliminate alternative sources of information. Press freedom was destroyed, and journalists and writers were turned into agents of ideological transmission. Despite this, Welch emphasizes that propaganda did not always achieve the desired effect, and in the private sphere some citizens remained skeptical, especially in the later years of the war.

The Soviet Union, especially during the Stalin era, built a strictly centralized system of information control. Propaganda was used as a tool for the formation of a new type of citizen – the so-called "Soviet man." Every element of public life, including science, art, education, and culture, was subordinated to the ideological directives of the Communist Party. This was accompanied by mass campaigns, a cult of personality, and the suppression of dissent.

The outstanding American historian of Hungarian origin Peter Kenez, who made a significant contribution to the study of Soviet history and, in particular, the mechanisms of propaganda in the early USSR, in his book *"The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929"* not only describes the tools of mass mobilization, but also reveals the ideological, cultural and organizational mechanisms by which the Bolsheviks sought to construct a new society and form a type of "Soviet man". His work became a key source for all subsequent studies in the field of Soviet information policy and mass communication. He argues that the Soviet Union was the first state in history that attempted to control every aspect of public information and mass culture from the moment of its inception. "The Soviet political order was born out of the anarchy of the Civil War. Russia, which had always been undergoverned, now fell apart: The weak ties between citizen and government snapped. The decisive task was to rebuild institutions, to restructure authority, and thereby to make the political and economic order function. The Bolsheviks, of course, had no plans for the circumstances in which they found themselves; no one could have foreseen the sequence of events that left Lenin at the head of Russia's government. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks brought with them from their revolutionary past institutions that could be adapted for the new tasks". (Kenez, P. 1985. 4-6)

Thus, Peter Kenez's research shows that Soviet propaganda from the very beginning was not only an instrument for influencing public opinion, but also the foundation of a new type of state governance. The Bolsheviks realized that in order to retain power and transform society, not only weapons and repressions were necessary, but also an active influence on the consciousness of the masses. In this context, propaganda acted as a technology for shaping political reality.

During the Cold War, the information confrontation between the USSR and Western countries acquired an institutionalized form, expressed in the creation and active operation of transnational media structures. A special role in this process was played by international broadcasting services – "Voice of America" and "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty". These channels systematically broadcast information aimed at an audience within the countries of the socialist camp, with the aim of undermining the monopoly on the interpretation of reality established by communist regimes.

Arch Puddington's *"Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty"* (Puddington, A. 2000) provides a detailed look at the role of Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe as instruments of US soft power during the Cold War. Puddington highlights how these stations were an important element of the US strategy to spread democratic values and counter communist

propaganda. He describes how Radio Liberty provided alternative information, supported dissident movements, and shaped public opinion receptive to liberal ideas and democratic institutions.

Thus, the historical evolution of propaganda demonstrates its exceptional flexibility and ability to adapt to changing political, technological and cultural conditions. From church messages and government decrees to television advertising and social media algorithms, propaganda remains one of the most important tools for shaping public consciousness and managing the perception of reality.

Theoretical approaches to the study of propaganda

Theoretical approaches to the study of propaganda cover an interdisciplinary space and were formed at the intersection of philosophy, sociology, political science, psychology, media studies and communication sciences. The study of propaganda relies on several theoretical approaches, each of which offers its own perspective on the mechanisms of propaganda's impact on the audience.

Propaganda is a purposeful activity of spreading ideas, beliefs or information with the aim of influencing people's opinions, behavior or actions. In scientific literature, it is considered as a special form of symbolic influence in political, military, religious and cultural contexts. The term "propaganda" (from the Latin *propagare* - to spread) as mentioned above acquired mass significance in the 20th century, especially in the context of two world wars. Propaganda became an integral part of political mobilization, ideological pressure and public opinion management.

Among the scientists who studied propaganda, a special place is occupied by Harold Lasswell, whose works laid the foundations for the empirical and theoretical analysis of mass communication. His contribution to the study of propaganda had a huge impact on the development of the humanities and social sciences in the 20th century. In the context of world wars and the growing importance of the media, Lasswell proposed a scientific, systematic and pragmatic approach to the analysis of propaganda impact, focusing on the mechanisms of influence on mass consciousness, the structure of the communication process and the goals of propaganda.

In his classic work, *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, Lasswell describes propaganda as "the control of collective attitudes through the manipulation of significant symbols." (Lasswell, H.D. 1927. 232) Propaganda, in his view, is not simply the dissemination of information, but a strategic influence aimed at changing the behavior and thinking of the masses in accordance with political goals. Within the behaviorist approach, Lasswell linked propaganda with the stimulus-response theory, in which individuals are objects of external psychological influence.

Lasswell's most famous contribution to communication theory was the model he formulated in "Structure and Function of Communication in Society" (1948):

(Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?)

This formula represents a schematic structure of a communication act, allowing one to analyze both propaganda and any mass communication from the point of view of its components. The model has become basic in communication and media studies, especially in the analysis of political and advertising messages. (McQuail, D. 2010. 64)

Thus, Lasswell's approach opened the way to a systemic and interdisciplinary analysis of information influence, transforming propaganda from a political accusation into a subject of scientific research. Today, in the context of information wars and digital media, Lasswell's legacy remains relevant and serves as a basis for the analysis of both classical and modern propaganda.

One of the most profound and original theorists of propaganda in the 20th century was Jacques Ellul, author of the influential book *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1962), translated into many languages. Ellul offers not only a typology and structure of propaganda, but also a philosophical understanding of its connection with technology, mass culture and the alienation of the individual. According to Ellul, propaganda is a stable, systematic and comprehensive form of influence aimed not only at changing behavior, but also at shaping the very way of thinking of the individual. In contrast to the understanding of propaganda as a lie or manipulation, Ellul emphasizes that it can be based on truth, but at the same time be no less dangerous.

"Propaganda is not the overt and free communication of ideas; it is, rather, a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization." (Ellul, J. 1973. 4)

Ellul distinguishes two key types:

Political propaganda – targeted influence from states, parties or movements with specific political goals.

Sociological propaganda – deep influence of society on the individual through mass culture, everyday symbols, language, advertising, education. It is less noticeable, but more powerful, since it creates basic attitudes of perception.

Jacques Ellul proposed not just a theory of propaganda, but a holistic philosophy of modern society, in which propaganda acts as a structural element of social reality. His approach allowed us to rethink the very nature of information influence and expand the boundaries of mass consciousness analysis. In the era of digital media and information wars, Ellul's ideas gain new strength, reminding us that the most effective propaganda is the one that becomes invisible.

The topic of propaganda in democratic societies has traditionally been perceived as paradoxical: it is believed that systematic distortion of information is impossible under conditions of freedom of speech. However, Noam Chomsky, a linguist and political activist, together with economist Edward Herman, proposed a concept that explains how propaganda can effectively function precisely in conditions of formal democracy. Their work, “Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media”, is one of the most influential critiques of the functioning of the media in capitalist societies.

“The propaganda model seeks to explain how populations are manipulated and how consent for economic, social and political policies is 'manufactured' in the public mind through the mass media.” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 11)

Chomsky and Herman reject the liberal myth of the media as an independent “fourth pillar of democracy.” They argue that the media in the United States act not as independent institutions that control power, but as propaganda systems that serve the interests of the political and economic elite. This critique is closely linked to the Marxist tradition of analyzing ideology, as well as the work of theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and Herbert Marcuse.

Chomsky and Herman's approach to the study of propaganda provides a powerful tool for critically analyzing media in liberal capitalist societies. Their model demonstrates that propaganda is not exclusively an attribute of authoritarian regimes, but can function effectively under the guise of free speech and market competition. In the context of increasing platform dependence and algorithmic control, the information filtering model retains its relevance both theoretically and empirically.

Modern challenges: the digital age and propaganda

In the 21st century, propaganda has undergone radical changes, transforming from a one-way mass broadcasting tool into a multi-level and dynamic system of information influence, focused on network communications and algorithmic attention management. Unlike traditional propaganda models characteristic of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, modern forms increasingly use the capabilities of digital technologies – primarily the Internet, social media and machine learning – for targeted and personalized manipulation of mass consciousness.

Today, the Internet, which is a guest in every one of our homes, brings with it pleasant experiences, facilitates our work and communication, and takes us to places where we may never be able to go. However, as in any field, there is another side to the coin. Let's not forget that with the full penetration of modern information technologies into our lives, various forces, and sometimes states, skillfully use their capabilities to achieve their interests. (Bahruz, E.T. 2023. 144)

Shoshana Zuboff's «*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*» offers a powerful critique of how digital platforms have turned everyday human experiences into data-driven mechanisms of behavioral control. She argues: “Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data”. (Zuboff, S. 2019) This frames a troubling parallel to digital propaganda-platforms systematically capture our actions, predict future behavior, and feed our attention with manipulated content, reinforcing filter bubbles, misinformation, and scripted narratives to shape public perception.

Unlike traditional propaganda of the 20th century, which was based primarily on the linear transmission of propaganda content through centralized media, digital propaganda is distinguished by its secrecy, fragmentation, and high degree of personalization. One of the key tools of this new type of information impact has become microtargeting – the targeted distribution of content adapted to the

individual characteristics of users. These characteristics are determined on the basis of psychographic analysis, which collects and interprets behavioral data from digital traces — likes, subscriptions, search history, and geolocation.

A striking example of the use of such technologies was the activity of Cambridge Analytica, which was involved in election campaigns, including the 2016 US presidential election. Cambridge Analytica used illegally obtained personal data of millions of Facebook users to build psychological profiles and then target political advertising. As Jim Isaak and Mina J. Hanna note, this case exposed the vulnerability of the digital space to manipulation: “The Cambridge Analytica scandal was a disturbing signal about how easily personal data can be used for political influence, while violating basic privacy norms.” (Isaak, J. & Hanna, M. 2018, p. 56).

Moreover, modern information operations are often implemented in a hybrid form - combining disinformation, trolling, memes and automated accounts (botnets), which makes them difficult to identify. These methods are increasingly used not only by states, but also by private actors - corporations, political strategists and even hacker groups. As highlighted in the report “Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media” (Oxford Internet Institute, 2019), digital platforms have become the arena for large-scale manipulative campaigns carried out with the help of bots, fake accounts and algorithmic targeting, aimed at undermining democratic processes and managing public opinion in the interests of political and corporate actors. “As computational propaganda becomes an increasingly ubiquitous tool for politics, national security, and intelligence operations, we hope these examples drive further Cyber troop activity takes on many organizational forms and diverse actors are leveraging social media to shape public opinion, set political agendas, and propagate ideas. Organisational Form conversations around what are appropriate, democratic and acceptable uses of these tools by state actors”. (Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P.N. 2019)

Thus, digital propaganda is becoming part of a broader ecosystem of information influence, in which the boundaries between truth and fiction, news and manipulation are erased. This requires a new level of media literacy and legal regulation in the field of digital communications.

Ways to Counter Propaganda: A Scientific and Analytical Review

In the context of the rapid spread of digital technologies and the transformation of the media environment, the problem of countering propaganda is becoming especially relevant. Propaganda today is not only a tool of authoritarian regimes, but also part of hybrid conflicts, manipulative political technologies and commercial strategies. Effective counteraction requires a systemic and multi-level approach, covering both state and public mechanisms.

One of the key tools in the fight against propaganda in the digital age is to improve the media literacy of the population. Modern research emphasizes that media-educated citizens are less susceptible to manipulative messages, fakes, and conspiracy theories (Guess et al., 2020). In the context of information overload, users must have a number of critical skills: distinguish facts from interpretations and speculation; recognize emotionally charged or manipulative language; check sources of information for reliability and affiliations; use independent fact-checking resources such as Snopes, PolitiFact, StopFake.org, and others. These competencies allow citizens to navigate the media space and resist targeted attempts to distort reality.

Free and professional media are also a key tool in countering propaganda narratives. To do this, it is necessary to: institutionally support independent editorial boards; implement standards of editorial ethics and fact-checking; ensure transparency of media funding sources. Independent journalism acts as an information filter, creating an alternative to state or corporate manipulation.

In a context where much of the propaganda is spread through social media, legal and technical measures to regulate platforms play an important role, such as: requirements for transparency of algorithms; labeling of political advertising and sponsored content; removal of bot networks and coordinated inauthentic activity; cooperation with civil society organizations to monitor harmful content.

At the global level, it is important to develop ethical and legal norms regarding digital propaganda, including: international agreements to combat disinformation and cyber operations; platforms for interstate cooperation; the introduction of sanctions against states or organizations that systematically disseminate propaganda that violates international law.

One very important method of countering modern propaganda is technological solutions. Artificial intelligence and machine learning can be used not only for manipulation, but also in the fight against it: systems for automatic detection of disinformation and bots; digital trace and image verification tools (as InVID, FotoForensics do); platforms for tracking the origin of information (for example, the OriginTrail project).

Countering propaganda in the 21st century requires the combined efforts of the state, the scientific community, business and civil society. Only a comprehensive approach combining education, regulation, international cooperation and technological innovation can effectively counter the influence of destructive propaganda in a globalized and digital world.

Conclusion

The history of propaganda is the history of the battle for minds. It shows how, with the development of communication technologies and the increasing complexity of political structures, propaganda has transformed from a primitive form of influence into a powerful tool of mass control. From cave paintings and church bulls to radio, television and digital platforms, every medium has been used to some extent to transmit ideological attitudes and shape public opinion.

Understanding the historical logic of propaganda development allows us not only to explain its effectiveness in the past, but also to comprehend modern forms of manipulation operating under the guise of advertising, PR or even news reports. Today, in the context of information wars and oversaturation of the media space, the task of scientific analysis of propaganda is becoming especially relevant. Only a critical approach to sources of information and knowledge of the historical context allow society to maintain intellectual independence and resist the destructive influence of manipulative technologies.

Propaganda remains a powerful and universal tool of influence. In the context of post-truth and digital media reality, it is taking on new forms that require a systematic approach to study and regulation. The fight against propaganda is not only the task of the state, but also the responsibility of every citizen.

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