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SPECIAL ISSUE: PROPAGANDA

This essay was published as part of the Special Issue "Propaganda Analysis Revisited", guest-edited by Dr. A. J. Bauer (Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Creative Media, University of Alabama) and Dr. Anthony Nadler (Associate Professor, Department of Communication and Media Studies, Ursinus College).

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EDITORIAL

Propaganda Analysis revisited

This special issue is designed to place our contemporary post-truth impasse in historical perspective. Drawing comparisons to the Propaganda Analysis research paradigm of the Interwar years, this essay and issue call attention to historical similarities between patterns in mass communication research then and now. The hope is that contemporary misinformation studies scholars can learn from and avoid the pitfalls that have historically faced propaganda researchers. Placing research on propaganda in historical context offers one way of counterbalancing the depoliticizing tendencies that can be found in contemporary misinformation studies. It provides a wider field of vision, and calls attention to the contingency of the very concepts that social scientists use to frame their surveys and interviews, code their content, and ground their analysis.

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IMAGE BY GDJ ON PIXABAY

TOPICS EDITORIAL / PROPAGANDA

The long post-truth impasse

In 2016, the U.S. presidential and U.K. Brexit elections shook global confidence in a universally shared sense of objective reality and its capacity to serve as a basic standard of political judgment. Trump's surprise victory, in particular, sparked panic among journalists, some of whom openly worried whether the press had been "mortally wounded" (Pilkington, 2016). That year, Oxford Dictionaries declared "post-truth"—an adjective defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief"—as its word of the year (Oxford Languages, 2016).

While Oxford traces the term's etymology back only to 1992, the conditions that "post-truth" denotes have been a source of scholarly inquiry, media activism, and political struggle throughout the twentieth Century and now well into the twenty-first. Concerns over propaganda, and the

public's susceptibility to it, have been omnipresent in the United States and Europe since at least the Interwar Period and have played a crucial role in structuring the United States' central ideological and partisan binary ever since (Gary, 1999; Bauer, 2017). They also played a foundational role in establishing the academic discipline of mass communication studies.

As historian J. Michael Sproule has shown, the propaganda anxieties that emerged in the aftermath of the First World War produced a fledgling scholarly paradigm known as Propaganda Analysis (Sproule, 1997). Between 1919 and 1937, an interdisciplinary array of humanists, educators, and social scientists produced countless studies focused on how to identify, understand, and defuse propaganda messages. This scholarly trend was bolstered by countless funders, and even supported by the then newly formed Social Science Research Council. It was also, Sproule contends, a fundamentally progressive endeavor—non-partisan, but driven by a "reform-minded probing into social institutions and persuasive campaigns to find whose interests were being advanced, how, and with what effect for society" (Sproule, 1987).

Propaganda Analysis faltered during the run-up to the Second World War. By the dawn of the Cold War, it had been eclipsed by a new communication research paradigm, typified by Paul Lazarsfeld's more "limited" theory of media effects (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). This new paradigm was focused less on the imperatives of social progress than on methodological sophistication and practical utility to government agencies and commercial interests. Propaganda Analysis lingered in the right anti-communist fringe, and among a tight-knit cadre of anti-capitalist activist scholars, but it became a marginal concern within the social sciences.

Like the Interwar years, our "post-truth era" has been a boon for scholars of propaganda, misinformation, and right-wing media around the globe, as funders and publishers rushed to fill perceived gaps in the scholarly literature. This has yielded a bumper crop of astute studies of our present political communication conjuncture. Research institutes such as Harvard's Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society, Columbia's Tow Center for Digital Journalism, and the Data & Society Research Institute, have led the way in producing cutting-edge, solutions-driven scholarship with an eye toward practical applicability and public engagement.

Yet, some of the depoliticizing tendencies of the "communication research" paradigm linger. As Yochai Benkler and his colleagues noted in their pathbreaking study *Network Propaganda*, explanations for our current post-truth era have tended to foreground foreign subversion or technological determinist narratives—blaming Russian operatives, or Macedonian teenagers, or algorithms, or filter bubbles, or echo chambers (Benkler et al., 2018). When these phenomena are used to provide "nonpartisan explanations" for a surge in the spread of misinformation and the causes of the legitimacy crisis facing established news institutions, it obscures the political stakes of our present political communication impasse. Too much focus on technical fixes or on thwarting a narrowly defined set of "bad actors" blunts the imperative for civic engagement in

crafting media policies and building media institutions to serve democratic needs (Pickard 2019; Crain & Nadler, 2019).

Historicizing propaganda research

Placing research on propaganda in historical context offers one way of counterbalancing the depoliticizing tendencies that can be found in contemporary misinformation studies. It provides a wider field of vision and calls attention to the contingency of the very concepts that social scientists use to frame their interviews, code their content, and ground their analysis. Raymond Williams once lamented the tendency in social science to reduce systems to "fixed forms." He astutely noted that social structures and processes only appear fixed artificially or in hindsight—social experiences are in fact lived "in solution" (Williams, 1977, p. 133).

Historical analysis can provide context that demonstrates how apparently coherent social processes—which are sometimes fixed in concepts like "propaganda," "misinformation," "echo chambers," "the news ecosystem," or even "journalism"—are dynamic, shaped in dialogue with broader political common sense and its path determined by established understandings of prior historical phenomena (Bauer, 2018; Nadler, 2019). Historical analysis, as applied to misinformation studies, need not be reduced to any one method—it may rely upon archival research, but it need not be confined to it. Comparative historical analysis invites a reflexive dialogue between how a phenomenon has been characterized in past iterations (based upon comparable prior examples) and how it is experienced in a given historical conjuncture.

This raises the question: How do misinformation studies of today relate to the propaganda studies of the Interwar era and of the latter twentieth century? The authors in this issue make a case for the history of propaganda research as something more than an antiquarian curiosity. History cannot provide easy answers to present questions or solve our contemporary dilemmas. But it can illuminate some of the particularity of present assumptions and might help to recover ideas and frameworks that could prove productive today. For instance, in the years following the Second World War, researchers including Löwenthal and Guterman (1949) and Adorno (1951) articulated a framework for propaganda research that connected the potential power of propaganda within a historical moment to the emotional longings cultivated by prevailing social conditions. Reexamining this approach might push current misinformation scholars to consider a broader array of models for explaining the "pull" factors in the popular uptake of misinformation. Instead of only looking at supposedly universal cognitive tendencies like confirmation bias, which have been at the forefront of contemporary research, revisiting thinkers like Löwenthal, Gutman, and Adorno could inspire more investigation of socially conditioned dispositions that might shape the demand-side of propaganda.

Just as important as rediscovering productive concepts that have been forgotten, rigorous historical examination forces us to scrutinize familiar tales about the past that are folded into contemporary self-understandings. Some fields burnish a flattering image of past contributions to cast a positive light on present-day inheritors. This is not the dominant trend in the field of misinformation studies, which has largely distanced itself from the history of propaganda research rather than claiming it as a legacy. Certainly, there are some compelling reasons for the field's name change, including a sense that "misinformation" covers a wider object of analysis than does "propaganda." But misinformation studies scholars will do themselves no favors if they remember only a caricature of propaganda research so as to inflate the new field's confidence in overcoming the narrow-minded blunders of its predecessors. For example, that earlier propaganda researchers tended to rely on their own sensibilities to intuitively identify their objects of analysis (Bauer, 2017, 2018; Anderson, this issue) might be recognized as not only a cautionary tale, but as an ongoing tension in contemporary research.

One distorted memory of propaganda research that has been especially influential in the field of communication—and remains prevalent today, despite repeated debunking—is that such research figured ordinary people as gullible dupes and presented media influence as a "magic bullet." This rendering served as a straw figure, designed to promote a more positivistic approach to studying media influence and which raised fewer ethical questions that could nettle the institutions that helped fund the ascendant communication research paradigm (Sproule 1989; Lubken 2008). Writing off earlier propaganda research as misguided by a fundamental error—one betraying elitist prejudice—diminished scholarly engagement with the complicated questions this earlier discourse raised.

As several of the contributors in this issue argue (see especially works by Jeffrey Pooley and Victor Pickard), communication research turned away from squarely facing the normative questions this research started to raise, especially regarding the structural—and political—underpinnings of media systems that created conditions ripe for propaganda. Reconsidering the history of this research in light of our contemporary post-truth impasse can bring new life to the normative questions and debates that had been kept shuttered away from institutionally funded media research.

This issue

Our point of departure, Interwar Propaganda Analysis in the United States and Europe offers but one vantage into the long and variegated history of propaganda research—a limiting one, at that. It foregrounds the experiences and concerns of the Global North. While these contexts played an outsized role in the development of mass communication studies around the world, they have

often failed to address or adequately explain propaganda in the Global South, as issue contributor Aman Abhishek deftly illustrates. U.S.-based Propaganda Analysis also tends to de-emphasize state-oriented solutions to dis- and misinformation (like those explored in this issue by Sonia Robles)—a relic not only of general U.S. anti-statism, but of the field's roots in opposition to the abuses of the Woodrow Wilson administration's Committee on Public Information during the First World War.

The history of propaganda research, like that of propaganda itself, is vexed, non-linear, and over-determined. For this issue, we've selected case studies designed to illuminate research trajectories and counter-propaganda methods that resonate with challenges faced in our contemporary situation of post-truth impasse/global pandemic. Most of these studies offer visions of paths untaken or foreclosed, of approaches marginalized or diminished. Our hope is that scholars of contemporary dis- and misinformation will consider their work in relation to this long tradition of propaganda scholarship, to recognize it as a site of struggle with lessons for the present.

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