Stories are Weapons: Psychological Warfare and the American Mind

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Stories are Weapons: Psychological Warfare and the American Mind, reviewed by A.J. Bauer, *History of Media Studies* 5 (2025), https://doi.org/10.32376/d895a0ea.2c1026d3.

Annalee Newitz. *Stories are Weapons: Psychological Warfare and the American Mind*. 272 pp. W. W. Norton, 2024. $18.99 (paper).

In the acknowledgments to *Stories Are Weapons*, Annalee Newitz notes that their book started as a "manifesto" but transformed along the way into an intensive work of historical research. As a weapon, the story Newitz tells has some political utility. It smartly and provocatively weaves the histories of US settler colonialism, eugenics, racial segregation, misogyny, and homophobia into contemporary debates over mis- and disinformation in electoral politics. It can best be read as a popular front text—an instrument for guiding "resistance" liberals toward more radical (and accurate) interpretations of US history.

Perhaps the book's most intriguing throughline is its focus on Paul Linebarger—a US Army officer during World War II who helped build the Office of War Information and wrote the canonical text on military propaganda, *Psychological Warfare* (1948). Linebarger, a prolific writer of science fiction, was better known by the pen name Cordwainer Smith. Newitz draws fruitful parallels between the worldbuilding strategies of science fiction authors and successful psychological operations ("psyops"), noting that both science fiction and miliary propaganda involve mixing fact with fiction to create psychologically compelling narratives.

As a fellow science fiction writer, Newitz clearly sees in Linebarger a sort of kindred spirit. *Psychological Warfare* becomes a diagnostic manual—cited like gospel through the book, used to draw parallels

between domestic US ideological projects and modes of political communication, especially on the right, and military "psyops." Linebarger's idea of "psychological disarmament" becomes the foundation for Newitz's own prescriptions for mitigating the harmful effects of right-wing propaganda.

"Weapons intended for use in combat zones are now being deployed in the American suburbs," Newitz writes (xvi–xvii), somewhat troublingly excusing the use of psychological manipulation in warfare. "When we use psyops in our cultural conflicts, we tear down the wall between what's appropriate in domestic disagreements among Americans and what's acceptable in combat against a foreign enemy."

But stories don't function like kinetic weapons—not really. Contrary to fanciful vernacular understandings of media effects, words aren't "magic bullets." The tension between that stubborn fact and this book's framing limits its contribution to media historiography. It also undercuts the book's central aim—opposing the imposition and maintenance of unjust social, cultural, and political hierarchies.

If this book were titled *We Have Always Been Post-Truth*, and framed accordingly, I would have little to critique. In my reading, that is this book's latent (and compelling) argument. As Newitz shows, from the "Indian Wars" to the Cold War to contemporary Culture Wars, US history is replete with instances of ideological struggle—conflicting attempts to make sense of the world and to cultivate a shared sense of reality. Too often, narratives designed to perpetuate or impose hierarchies based upon gender, race, sexuality, and class have achieved hegemony, distorting reality in favor of white heteropatriarchy.

But Newitz does not narrate it in this way. Instead, they read US political and social history through the lens of "psychological warfare." In their telling, everything becomes a "psyop," or "weaponized storytelling"—from Edward Bernays's involvement in toppling Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala, to the concept of "Manifest Destiny," to Jim Crow laws, to anti-LGBTQ campaigns. But Newitz's definition of "psyop" aligns too neatly with narratives that they find morally and ethically harmful. The result is an unhelpful blurring of the lines between the book's normative and empirical claims.

For example, in a chapter titled "A Fake Frontier," Newitz unpacks settler discourse in the US colonial and early republic eras, including concepts like "manifest destiny" and the "myth of the vanishing Indian," to show how it distorted the reality of European genocide against Indigenous peoples in order to soothe settlers' guilty consciences.

"It was a very seductive psyop, perpetuated by the US government, military, and pop culture," Newitz writes (39). "European settlement was recast as an inevitable process of population replacement, in which Indigenous nations were naturally erased by the spreading borders of the United States of America."

There is no disputing that last sentence. But what does calling settler colonial ideological formation a "psyop" do, exactly? By blaming "propaganda aimed primarily at white settlers" (38), Newitz unwittingly frames European settlers as hapless dupes, rather than as active participants in the mythologization of the "frontier."

Later, Newitz quotes a tweet by science fiction writer N. K. Jemisin, arguing that "white supremacy is a psyop" (104). This makes it seem as though white people need to be tricked into believing longstanding and deeply entrenched fictions that justify their elevated status in racial hierarchy.

In both instances, and throughout this book, the term "psyop" is used more as a pejorative to indicate normative disapproval than as an adequate description of how supremacist ideologies actually work.

Contra Newitz, ideology is rarely reducible to mere top-down conveyance or psychological manipulation—and never within the contexts of liberal democracy. It is more often produced dialectically between elites and regular people, whose interests, values, and sentiments often align in unjust and violent constellations. This mutual construction of meaning occurs in the context of ideological conflict, where competing narratives of reality vie for social and cultural predominance.

To their credit, Newitz is by no means the first intelligent and politically right-minded person to believe that propaganda is a cause, rather than an effect, of that ideological conflict. In the late 1930s, a group of journalists and scholars launched the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) to combat anti-democratic propaganda through media literacy. They believed that by training Americans to identify common rhetorical strategies used by propagandists, they could inoculate the public against agreeing with reactionary messaging.

Among the IPA's critics was none other than Edward Bernays, a villain in Newitz's tale. But Bernays agreed with the IPA's premise that democracy was "in danger from the conflicting ideologies that are competing with it for the interest and support of the public." He differed in method: "Might it not even be a sound procedure to carry on a campaign to establish a greater validity for the symbols of democracy with the public directly?"[1]

[1] A.J. Bauer, "Glittering Generalities: Reconsidering the Institute for Propaganda Analysis," *International Journal of Communication* 18 (2024): 1983.

That is, while the IPA sought to promote democracy by mitigating the effects of anti-democratic propaganda, Bernays argued in favor of openly propagandizing in favor of democracy.

Like the IPA's "propaganda analysis," Newitz's "psychological warfare" heuristic misdiagnoses the problem at hand, resulting in ineffective prescriptions. The final third of *Stories Are Weapons* advocates for "psychological disarmament," pointing to the importance of archives, libraries, and social media reforms designed to mitigate for the salience of right-wing propaganda campaigns.

Despite earlier waxing poetic about worldbuilding in science fiction, and noting its capacity for effective use in psyops, at the end Newitz finds themself yearning for a world *without* propaganda. "*We must end this war*," Newitz writes (203). "That means trusting one another enough to put down our psychological weapons."

As we face another Trump administration, I can sympathize with Newitz's desire for an end to politics. But this conclusion is diametrically opposed to the argument throughout the book—one that attributes considerable historical agency to psychologically compelling stories.

If we want to live in a more egalitarian world—one where genocide, white supremacy, misogyny, and homophobia are no longer thinkable, let alone actionable—we need more compelling narratives of what that reality would look like. We need the communication tools and educational scale to make those stories widely salient. If stories are weapons—and let's be clear, they are not—we don't need disarmament. We need to *scale up* armament on the left.

The only way out is through.

Bibliography

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