



## Propaganda – Term`s Conceptual Delimitations and Evolution

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**ABSTRACT:** The use of propaganda to achieve political, military, economic or social objectives is a well-known fact. This practice being encountered since the 17th century among actors on the international scene. For the present article, we propose to analyze the conceptual framework of the notion of propaganda. The conceptual delineation of this element is important to ensure that we use the terms clearly and precisely, avoid confusion and misunderstandings and, at the same time, establish the meaning we assign to them.

**KEYWORDS:** Concept, Delimitation, Evolution, Propaganda.

### INTRODUCTION

Defining propaganda is a difficult task given the multiple perspectives of analysis (social, political, psychological). Countless works have tried to define this persuasive practice to illustrate all its characteristics, these approaches being influenced by historical, technological and cultural changes in contemporary society (Luckert and Bachrach 2009); (Henderson and Braun 2016); (Hobbs 2020).

Among the first definitions advanced in specialized literature, Harold Laswell (1927) stands out, who considered that "propaganda is the management of collective attitudes through the manipulation of significant symbols" (627). Later, Edward Bernays, emphasizing the duration of the propaganda process, defined propaganda as "a constant and lasting effort to create or shape events to influence the public's relations with the organization or group" (Bernays 1928, 25).

Emphasizing the systematic nature of propaganda and its implications for rational judgment, Randal Marlin defined propaganda as "the systematic action to modify or influence a particular audience in ways that circumvent or suppress the appropriate, rational, and reflective judgment of an individual" (Marlin 2013, 12).

Chronologically, the concept of propaganda was born from an ideological point of view, but also from an institutional point of view at the beginning of the 17th century, when Pope Gregory XV decided to create a new papal department - "Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide", tasked with all the problems regarding the propagation of Christian doctrine (Fellows 1959). At this moment, the term "propaganda" was coined and entered today in political and social language.

The First World War caused an unprecedented development of military propaganda. The belligerent states considered propaganda to be in the same register of importance as weapons and military equipment. In the 20th century, totalitarian movements resorted to propaganda to impose their ideologies and aspirations to power: the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Similarly, during the Second World War, the propaganda present in the international space manifested itself in every aspect of states' political and public life. The Cold War, also known as the East/West conflict, once again led to the emergence of international propaganda on a large scale, illustrating the ideological conflict between the USSR and the USA. Recently, propaganda has been used in military conflicts: in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine.

### TYPES OF PROPAGANDA

Different theorists have differentiated several types of propaganda: white propaganda, black propaganda and grey propaganda (Becker 1949); (Ellul 1973); (Gray and Martin 2007):

1) white propaganda includes openly promoting and advocating ideas, information and attitudes without concealing the message's origin and encompasses public relations, advertising and diplomacy. White propaganda comes from a properly identified source, and the information tends to be accurate. Although the information conveyed is quite close to the truth, it is presented in a manner that tries to convince the audience;

2) black propaganda involves the deliberate and strategic spreading of misinformation. According to sociologist Howard Becker (1949), black propaganda intentionally misrepresents the source of the message in order to create the impression of credibility and



accuracy. For example, rumours can be included in this category. Black propaganda is attributed to a fake source spreading fabricated information;

3) Gray propaganda is based on ambiguity, transmitting information that may or may not be true/false. Grey propaganda lies between white and black propaganda. The source may or may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy of the information is uncertain.

Also, propaganda can act nationally (national or internal) or externally (external).

Another distinction required in propaganda theory is the ratio between rational and emotional propaganda (Thomson 1999, 71). This categorization drew attention, beyond the sets of means they use, to the areas of consciousness towards which the systematic action of propaganda is directed. Rational propaganda appeals to the facts and tries to present them coherently and logically. Rational propaganda uses syllogisms and demonstrations and addresses logical thinking, while irrational or sentimental propaganda uses allegorical and metaphorical constructions, images and sensible representations, addressing the unconscious.

Although propaganda appears delimited and structured in the theoretical-academic sphere, we believe that, in reality, most of the time, the different types of propaganda overlap and intermingle with each other. For example, a state will use white and black propaganda to promote certain policies or ideologies, domestically or externally.

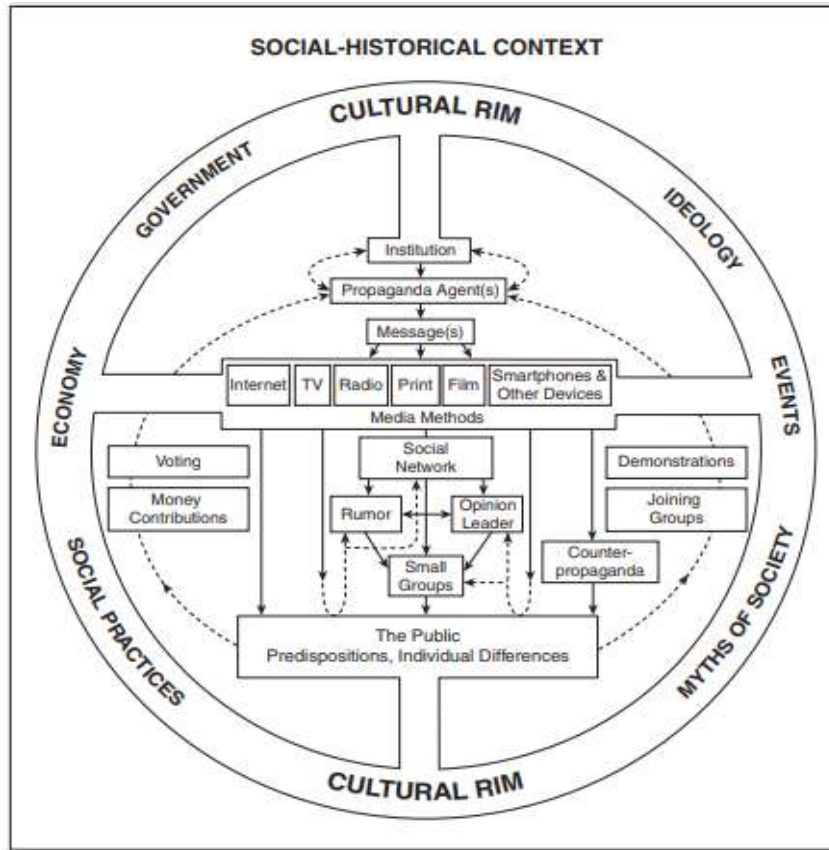
Regarding the means of communication, propaganda uses a variety of communication tools. Before the appearance of newspapers and television, symbols, coins, heraldic signs, architecture, sculptures and paintings were used. Later, printing, graphic techniques, and all modern technologies were adopted for propaganda purposes, especially film and radio (Ginsberg 2013).

Regarding the purposes of propaganda, a first perspective is provided by Harold Lasswell's study entitled *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927), which argued that the purposes of propaganda are: "mobilizing and creating hatred against the enemy; creating and maintaining diplomatic and friendly relations with other states; cooperation with other neutral states; demoralizing the enemy" (1927, 195). We believe that this perspective, applicable to war propaganda, can be updated and adapted to the reality of the 21st century since the emergence of the Internet has determined a profound change in the information environment and limited the ability of state actors to isolate any environment from external information.

Propaganda can also be understood as a socially determined form of communication and process. To understand how propaganda works, we must consider how the socio-historical context allows it to work.

Looking at the propaganda model in *Figure 1*, it can be seen that it describes the development of propaganda communication as a process within a social system. The propaganda process takes the form of a flow of messages through a network system that includes propagandists, various media, and a social network and ends with the possibility of a response from the public or a target audience. The flow of messages is placed in a social-historical context. The model describes, therefore, the need to examine the process of propagandistic communication in the multitude of features included in a socio-historical cultural framework. The flow of propaganda from the institution to the public has multiple channels that feed or are fed by cultural elements to and from the institution itself, the media, and the public.

The cultural framework is the infrastructure that provides the context in which messages are sent and received. How propaganda is developed, used and received is culturally specific (Jowett and O'Donnell 2015). Elements of a culture—its ideologies, societal myths, government, economy, social practices, and specific events—influence propaganda. For example, if a society is closed, such as the Russian Federation or North Korea, it is increasingly difficult for these societies to remain totally "closed" in a world flooded with sophisticated and prolific communication systems and deliberately prevent outside information from reaching their citizens.



**Figure 1:** Model of the process of propaganda  
**Source:** Jowett and O Donnell 2015, 390

Regarding propaganda techniques, we will refer to those investigated by Randal Marlin (Marlin 2013, 92-98) in the work Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion:

- capturing attention - public attention is an essential condition in propaganda. To capture attention, propaganda adapts its messages depending on the audience, the purpose and the message itself of the propaganda campaign;
- the appeal to emotion - generally, propaganda relies heavily on emotional levers. Propaganda during a conflict fuels hatred and anger against an enemy, turning the enemy into a person unworthy of rights or respect;
- credibility - because the public cannot always investigate the arguments presented, they pay attention to the credentials of the person or group presenting the message. This leads to the concern of propagandists to give credibility to the messages they convey. For example, considerable sums are allocated to studies to create a scientific appearance for the public.
- analogy and language - this technique promotes a propaganda element by association with things or people viewed favourably. Words and images are used for this purpose so that certain favourable words are applied to features of the relevant project or unfavourable words are applied to things that the propagandist wants the public to reject. Cultural symbols are easy to exploit for propaganda purposes;
- framing - Walter Lippmann (1998) investigated long ago how stereotypes affect our worldview and how they can result in a view that affects ethical judgments. Framing theory refers to the ability of communicators to present a certain issue in such a way as to influence the interpretation and understanding that the audience will have on the topic discussed. The central idea of framing theory is that the media focus on certain events and then places them in a field of meaning. Conceptually, we define news frames as "central organizing ideas or stories that give meaning to an unfolding event by weaving a connection between them. The frame suggests what the essence of the problem is" (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143). In short, a news frame can affect an individual's reasoning



by emphasizing certain aspects of reality and marginalizing other aspects into the background: the news frame has a selective function.

Summarizing, we can say that propaganda represents a type of communication that systematically and planned tries to manipulate, persuade or induce feelings of uncertainty and behaviours in the target audience by transmitting distorted information to achieve its strategic objectives (economic, political, social or military order). Propaganda is not only a process through which certain ideas, concepts, and ideologies are transmitted. However, it is important in forming individual and collective social and political attitudes and behaviours. The action of propaganda on individuals or groups is achieved by transmitting a message, but what gives the process of transmitting the message a propagandistic character resides not so much in the structure or meaning of the message but especially in the conditions and goals that the respective message brings into the sphere the desired social relations and effects, of the social reality as a whole.

## CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of the form in which propaganda is presented, its defining, distinctive notes, in comparison with other social or political activities, are given by the explicit or implicit ideological character of the message, by its complete subordination about certain predetermined goals, which are in close connection with the system of social interests of the individuals and groups that initiate the propaganda, the social, political and economic effects it leads. Any communication influences the party to whom something is communicated. Propaganda, however, considers influence only as a premise, aiming to determine changes in consciousness and, based on these, changes in the sphere of the behaviour of those who come under its impact.

We believe that it is worth recalling Serge Tchakhotine's (1939) study on propaganda entitled *The Rape of Gratitude*, from which a valuable idea emerges, namely that the absence of war does not prevent the use of propaganda, associated by the author with psychological violence and the violation of individual freedom.

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