

Revisiting the Theoretical Foundations of Propaganda

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This article revisits the theoretical–philosophical foundations of propaganda to better position it in contemporary conceptual discussions about (computational) dis/mis/malinformation. It discusses propaganda as a tangible expression of ideology in communication—its principal purpose to enforce ideological goals, manage opinion, and consolidate loyalties. Starting from the notion of propaganda as a technique to further ideological interests that naturally hail from it, propaganda is discussed in relation to communication and information and how it relates to ideology and power, referring to ideas from key authors including Marx, Althusser, Gramsci, and Lukes. Taking inspiration from Gramsci, it discusses the role in propaganda communication of intellectuals, operating at the behest of elite power, but increasingly for the intellectuals’ own interests. Finally, propaganda, as communication, effecting values + beliefs, and therefore opinion, is analyzed as a central component in creating, influencing, and justifying Searle’s notion of status functions in society.

Keywords: propaganda, ideology, power, misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, computational propaganda

This contribution aims at a conceptual clarification of propaganda, as a response to the resurgent use of the term, yet it remains confused and eroded. Indeed, recent years have seen the return of propaganda as a contentious debate topic in both public and academic forums. Its resurgence occurs in conjunction with rising concerns about dis/mis/malinformation, especially in the context of so-called computational and network propaganda (Woolley & Howard, 2016). Efforts have been made to provide more precise definitions and conceptualizations of mis/dis/malinformation (Wardle, 2018) and to measure the empirical reality hereof (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019). By reevaluating the philosophical and theoretical foundations of propaganda, I seek to clarify its relationship to ideology and power, and to position it vis-à-vis contemporary terminology.

The word *propaganda* came into the present usage during the early modern period, when Pope Georgy XV established the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (The Office for Propagating the Faith) in 1622 to combat the rise of Protestantism, though its roots date back to the Roman Empire (Bernays, 1928/2005, p. 9). For centuries, the concept to propagate was an innocuous word to describe the act of spreading ideas until it garnered profoundly negative connotations in the 20th century, an interpretation that largely

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remains. In current usage, the label *propaganda* is rhetorically reserved for oppositional ideas or outright lies, whereas sympathetic ideas are typically deemed public relations (PR), public-service announcements, or outreach. Newspaper headlines like “White Supremacist Groups Expand Propaganda Efforts, Report Finds” (Hassan, 2020) suggest a notion of propaganda as biased or strategic communication. Recent updates of Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model (Goss, 2013; Pedro, 2011; Pedro-Carañana, Broudy, & Klaehn, 2018) have not tackled the concept of propaganda communication in its own right—neither has the growing field of research into computational propaganda that focuses on technological characteristics of propaganda distribution and the political economy motivating it (Zuboff, 2019) rather than on the core of propaganda communication as such. However, it is exactly the tempest of all types of computational (dis)information—from ignorant ramblings to calculated messages aimed at exerting influence—that requires propaganda to be differentiated from other forms of communication. Likewise, the growing interest in so-called social nudging initiatives, which focus on the behavioral rather than the ideational or attitudinal (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), require conceptual clarification of its relationship to propaganda. An authoritative definition and conceptualization of propaganda, fit for the contemporary political and communicative context, and that can sharpen research into its contemporary occurrences, is lacking. Yet “to spread ideas” is a fitting description, and it is worth noting that ideology was originally coined as “the science of ideas” by Destutt de Tracy (Althusser, 1971/2014, p. 171)—thus, to spread ideology is a reasonable place to revisit. This contribution returns to the roots of the conceptualization of propaganda, defines it, and explores its key components. A revisit provides an opportunity where “the present can configure the past to find points of rendezvous” (Peters, 1999, p. 11)—in this case, clarity.

To this end, I provide a brief history of the term *propaganda*, focusing on the 20th-century paradigmatic turn that is the basis of its contemporary usage and key to my conceptualization. This is followed by a brief discussion of related terms, like mis/dis/malinformation and computational propaganda. Next, I put forward my central thesis about what is propaganda in relationship to communication and information. I elaborate on how it relates to ideology, as discussed by Marx and Engels (2004) and Althusser (1971/2014); to power, following Lukes (1974/2005); and to the Gramscian notion of intellectuals that serves to frame ideological actors in their social function. I further relate propaganda to Searle’s (1995) collective intentionality and its role in creating status functions. Each of these aspects are discussed in depth. My approach is theoretical–philosophical. The article concludes with remarks on how this conceptualization can aid contemporary discussions and studies of propaganda.

Historic Trajectory of the Notion of Propaganda

The act of spreading ideas and information to establish political and ideological consensus, among other social conventions, is as old as organized society. Anthropological scholarship has studied propaganda as far back as 2500–1000 B.C. Sumerian rulers employed an official herald and “disposed of formal and regular channels through which to communicate” and “disseminated throughout the territories under his authority” (Finkelstein, 1979, p. 52) any information he pleased to support policy. Recognizing that wanton and “arbitrary displays of power” without explanation ran “the risk of popular rebellion. . . . ‘Public opinion’ was something a ruler could ignore at his own peril” (Finkelstein, 1979, p. 54). While a precise picture of ancient communication and organization is lacking, we can acknowledge that propaganda, deployed as ideology, persuasion, and rhetoric, was used in the service of organizing and standardizing societies. Indeed,

propaganda does not presuppose the conditions of modernity. These natural byproducts of human interaction and social behavior correlate with a *market for loyalties* (Price, 1994), which produces collective identity or community through the analogy of marketplace competition where the currency traded is one's loyalty. This marketplace has "existed everywhere and at all times" (Price, 2002, p. 32) as a social organizer. Here, "competitors for power, in a shuffle of allegiances" proceed to "organize a cartel of imagery and identity," which "yields the collection of myths, ideas, and narratives employed by a dominant group or coalition to maintain power" (Price, 2002, p. 667). For some authority to reach the "maximum propaganda effect," a situation of "psychological monopoly" would need to be established where ideological doctrine proceeds unquestioned and is subject to complete institutional control (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948, p. 117). Even in totalitarian states, such conditions can rarely be satisfied.

Insofar as public opinion was a concern to ancient rulers, today it is orders of magnitude greater. The liberal, constitutional state and era of mass communication require the conditions of modernity and exacerbate ideological competition. Colliding social and political forces generate a requirement for propaganda to adjudicate conflict through indoctrination and/or maintaining dominance. Referring to the political shift toward liberal democracy, Ellul (1965) suggested that propaganda is a "dilemma of the modern state . . . needed in the exercise of power for the simple reason that the masses have come to participate in political affairs" (p. 121). In short, the Sumerian kings and priests never faced competition for public opinion and loyalty so completely as institutions face today.

Ultimately, modern or ancient institutions exercising control have the option of absolute silence toward their governed populations or constituents. Technological advances, circumstantial from the view of ideology—such as a foot runner to a horse, a telegraph through to algorithms—expand the regional borders of societies and the efficiency of communication, which, in turn, expand the potential standardization of political and social doctrine. This complex cycle represents a contest of ideological paradigms, which can be framed as within the marketplace of loyalties. Ideological battles are fought everywhere and have created fragmented, inconsistent social thought. Hall (1986) observes and conveniently employs a market analogy: "the purchase of racist ideologies within the working-class or within related institutions like trade unions, which in the abstract [theoretical thought], ought to be dedicated to anti-racist positions" (p. 27). To double down on this point of abundant ideological conflicts, Hall felt the need to defend developing the theoretical work of an Italian (Gramsci), concluding "despite his apparently 'Eurocentric' position [he remains] one of the most theoretically fruitful" (Hall, 1986, p. 27) intellectuals.

Dis/Mis/Malinformation and Computational Propaganda

Recently, the term *propaganda* has resurfaced in discourse in communication and journalism fields, next to new terminology, in an attempt to add descriptive potency to, reductively, bad information. Accepted working definitions for mis/dis/malinformation have been established: misinformation describes "false connection" and "misleading content" with "no intent to harm"; disinformation includes "false context" and "imposter," "manipulated" or "fabricated" content with "intent to harm"; and malinformation is "based on reality but used to inflict harm" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018, p. 44). These terms are a more precise response to the broad term *fake news*, now referring to both television satire and misinformation, popularized by former President Trump and surrogates to attack and discredit mainstream news stories

deemed unfavorable (Waisbord, 2018, p. 7). Current definitions of propaganda are diffuse and vague. Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) state, "The term propaganda is not synonymous with disinformation, although disinformation can serve the interests of propaganda. But propaganda is usually more overtly manipulative than disinformation, typically because it traffics in emotional rather than informational messaging" (p. 45). Elsewhere, Wardle (2018) offers the following:

Propaganda is true or false information spread to persuade an audience, but often has a political connotation and is often connected to information produced by governments. It is worth noting that the lines between advertising, publicity and propaganda are often unclear. (p. 45)

I will argue that nearly all of the above can function as propaganda. I claim propaganda does not traffic directly in emotional content, but in ideological content. Propaganda influences emotions *toward* and *about* things by way of ideology. Emotions are wholly subjective experiences—for example, *fear*. Indeed, one cannot give *fear* to another, one makes another afraid of a thing in the world, producing the intended mental state. The truth or falsity of information, and unintended or intended harm are irrelevant if useful as propaganda, if it serves to enforce ideology and if there is an intention to spread. As such, true information of benevolent intentions certainly can be called propaganda.

Furthermore, the term *propaganda* has resurfaced in the context of contemporary technological developments in global communication that wildly increase the power and scope of propaganda, which, in turn, expand the conflict between and, critically, the number of, competing ideologies and loyalties. As the "vast majority of political speech acts now occur over digital platforms governed by terms-of-service agreements" (Woolley & Howard, 2016, p. 4882), these global, yet closed, structures have created a new and remarkably efficient landscape for so-called computational propaganda. However, here, too, conceptual clarity is missing. While some see computational propaganda as a new form of influencing, I argue that the aggregation of social media platforms, autonomous bots, and big data are the latest tools deployed to manage public opinion, using algorithms to target individuals with unprecedented precision and reaction time, creating the potential for extraordinary influence from stakeholders while not changing what is at the core of propaganda (Bolsover & Howard, 2017).

Central Thesis: What Is Propaganda?

I maintain that propaganda is a sustained campaign of communication to enforce ideological goals, manage opinion, and codify loyalties of target groups, whether specific social sets or broad populations. Propaganda communication can conform to any text or medium, indeed, whatever modality is deemed most appropriate: It is the "manipulation of significant symbols" (Lasswell, 1927, p. 627). Propaganda is the attempt to exercise influence, in most cases, toward evoking desired responses and or to spread and confirm doctrine. Propaganda breaks down into two general categories: slow evolving, sustained campaigns, and more immediate calls to action, for incitement or direct response. Both are aimed toward consolidating identity, indoctrination, and producing loyalty. There is no strict line of distinction between *slow* and *fast* propaganda; however, the former tends to be concerned with the maintenance and primacy of existing ideology. It is enforced by intellectuals, typically of the preceding wave of a codified doctrine, that maintain

“monopolies of knowledge” (Innis, 1950/2007, p. 28). In interpreting any such doctrine, these intellectuals often create an ideological feedback loop, with its principles and mandates becoming fundamentalists or conservatives of the ideology. The later type of propaganda as call to action is directed toward current events or challenging dominant ideologies. I contend both categories operate on the same basic principle of an ideological appeal. Propaganda is relevant to both social and political conflict, though political examples tend to be the more obvious.

Some scholars assert violent acts themselves constitute propaganda. So-called propaganda of the deed is when a “violent act is performed at least partly for propagandistic purposes” (Bakir, Herring, Miller, & Robinson, 2019, p. 325). Violence and propaganda are potent tools, often used in tandem. However, I maintain the *physical* violent act itself and communication/thought *toward* or *about* the act represent distinct events, albeit two tactics of an overall strategy. It is a simple, but important, distinction when delimiting propaganda. Propaganda functions in theater; violence is used to attract attention to the ideological message of propaganda or propaganda is used to explain violent acts by ideological justification/demonization. Furthermore, we can identify violent deeds which lack propaganda and ideological context. These appear to be confused spectacles or the actions of a sociopath, like the 2020 Christmas Day Nashville suicide bombing, which represents a case of terrorism lacking propaganda. Law enforcement and media grasped for ideological symbols/meaning/statements in search of political, religious, or social motive, ultimately finding little.

In short, we consider propaganda as a tangible expression of ideology in communication. Crucially, I claim this ideological propagation is fundamental to influence, create or maintain so-called status functions—money, government, entitlements, property . . . (Searle, 1998)—within a society. I combine Searle’s (1995) take on the creation of societal status functions with Martin’s (2015) basic program in his definition: Ideology conforms to *values + beliefs = opinion*. My claim is that propaganda is a method to effect *values + beliefs* and, therefore, *opinion*. Societies create or take away social powers, or status functions, which derive their existence due to our shared agreement toward them.

I also propose a method of analysis of propaganda communication. My framework invites a critical look at ideological appeals, to clarify their ends, their relation to facts and to potentially illuminate vested parties and motivations. To gauge this goal, crucially, we must see whether the propaganda brings the target *toward the facts/events* or *away from the facts/events*. From this stance, it is far easier to see what ideology is being advanced or consolidated, attacked or co-opted, and whether the purposed information is merely false. Dis/mis/malinformation, black propaganda, and fake news, by definition, would all be lies that take us away from the facts. True information can be used cynically to induce conformity, evoke fear, or direct targets away from certain facts/events. What makes them propaganda is their ideological objectives and motivations.

In what follows, I discuss in greater detail the main aspects of my thesis of propaganda—ideology, power, the function of intellectuals and collective intentionality—and how they relate to each other and to propaganda.

Ideology

If propaganda is a technique employed for the enforcement and dissemination of ideological goals, a conception of ideology must be articulated. Ellul (1965) called propaganda "the penetration of an ideology by means of its sociological context," continuing that all propaganda "implies an attempt to spread an ideology" (p. 63). All scholarly characterizations of ideology have vulnerabilities, and the term is *used* in various ways. I present a nominal conception of ideology and situate it as the crucial *terrain* of propaganda campaigns. Having abandoned the original formulation of ideology as the science of ideas, political and social theorists have offered definitions of ideology that include conceptions of beliefs, attitudes, and values, a notion of ideology as a type of knowledge. The seminal texts on ideology in the contemporary literature would be *The German Ideology*, by Marx and Engels (2004), and *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, by Althusser (1971/2014). Careful and illuminating critiques of both texts, respectively, are offered by Gramsci (1971) and Hall (1985, 1986).

The Marx and Engel approach to ideology is rooted in capitalist economic theory. Their theories show how economic structure bears on ideology within capitalist societies. Class structure, in particular the interests and ideology of the dominant superstructure, ought to explain ideology generally in society and how that bears on class consciousness, false consciousness and so on. The profound explanatory power of Marx and Engel's (2004) conception of political economy finds sharp limits when it comes to the phenomena of ideological generation. "The name ideology is given both to the necessary superstructure of a particular structure and to the arbitrary elucubrations of particular individuals" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 376) illustrates a *usage* problem associated with the term and one not easily resolved. Though Gramsci (1971) continues, "One must therefore distinguish between historically organic ideologies . . . which are necessary to the structure, and ideologies that are arbitrary, rationalistic and 'willed'" (pp. 376-377). To make a rigid distinction between the political economy of ideology, especially the deterministic model espoused by Marx and Engels (2004), and arbitrary ideology of particular individuals was, and remains, a total mystery. Propaganda as "the penetration of an ideology" (Ellul, 1965, p. 63) can fit either (organic or arbitrary) category. We then must recognize not all ideology or propaganda comes exclusively from the superstructure. There are ways that stakeholders, of some ideological issue or another, can participate in ideological formation and its circulation. Gramsci takes his criticism further: "The claim, presented as an essential postulate of historical materialism, that every fluctuation of politics and ideology can be presented and expounded as an immediate expression of the structure, must be contested in theory as primitive infantilism" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 407). I perhaps agree with this point more than Gramsci himself, who looks toward more nuanced explanations in Marx's other works to revise the notion. Gramsci (1971) nevertheless acknowledges the complexity of ideological generation, commitments, politics, human interests and offers an example of the Catholic Church and the Byzantine Church:

The two Churches, whose existence and whose conflict is dependent on the structure and on the whole of history, posed questions which are principles of distinction and internal cohesion for each side, but it could have happened that either of the Churches could have argued what in fact was argued by the other. The principle of distinction and conflict would have upheld all the same, and it is this problem of distinction and conflict that constitutes the historical problem. (p. 409)

Hall (1985) concurs, saying there is “no necessary correspondence” of structure and ideology, concluding “there is no law which guarantees that the ideology of a class is already and unequivocally given in or corresponds to the position which that class holds in the economic relations of capitalist production” (p. 94). Propaganda viewed as “manipulation of significant symbols” for establishing and maintaining ideological goals, “principles of distinction and internal cohesion” (Lasswell, 1927, p. 627) are crucial. Non-superstructure-generated ideologies and propagandas can indeed effect economic outcomes by various moves. The demands necessary for institutional and social cohesion can undoubtedly conflict with particular superstructure goals and ideologies, especially in the social domain. Arguably, a rare occurrence, but I suspect not. Most likely, when the dominant ideology and/or superstructure absorbs lower caste ideologies that are not organic, or pose minimal economic sacrifice, or that penetrate by way of propaganda, do so in some highly complex negotiated fashion. Propaganda is one piece to this negotiation. And, so, I argue that the political economy of institutions and social life bears a dominant pressure, but ultimately ideology can flow in all directions. Especially a social imperative of a moral kind.

Althusser’s (1971/2014) ideology takes a more humanistic, somewhat naturalistic, yet highly psychological and ultimately paradoxical stance. I find myself in agreement with Althusser on several important points.

First, that “man is by nature an ideological animal” and “we have to be aware that both author and reader of these lines live ‘spontaneously’ or ‘naturally’ in ideology” (Althusser, 1971/2014, p. 188). This concurs with Lasswell’s (1935) observation that “the propagandist is more object than subject of propaganda” (p. 187) and bears on the fact we have great difficulty recognizing our own ideological commitments and therefore our own propagandas. Propagandists are sharply aware of those commitments and how targets will decode, imposing their own ideology. In my view, it has not been determined whether we live in it exactly, but, perhaps, we consistently generate it as part of cognition. I think Althusser would probably agree, but the metaphoric-elaborated prose is not clear. As part of the original mystery of the concept of ideology, does it live inside us (individuals) or do we live inside it (social life)? I argue that it flows both ways, but my interpretation is that Althusser, like Marx, and to a lesser extent Gramsci, favors structural dominance. Furthermore, it is crucial in how we interpret and confront propaganda appeals: If we only view oppositional ideologies as propaganda, ones we favor as PR or outreach, we remain blind to our own commitments.

Second, that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, through the functioning of the category of the subject” and “that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way as to ‘recruit’ subjects among individuals” (Althusser, 1971/2014, p. 190). This relates directly to propaganda and highlights the fact that propaganda, at its core, is an ideological appeal cloaked in rhetoric. It is a mode of ideological recruitment. If it is not implicit in Althusser’s “all ideology hails or interpellates,” to be clear it *attempts* to do so. Likewise, Propaganda is the *attempt* to ideologically penetrate persons. I agree that an ideology naturally produces the effect of hailing or interpellating—persons hear ideas and accept, reject, or ignore. Here Althusser makes a crucial point. Propaganda technique super charges that hailing effect. In the case of propaganda campaigns, individuals are subjected to the message for ideological recruitment, producing further queries: To what extent are they open to new ideologies? Does that openness *subject* them to a great extent? As a point of logic, it does. To what extent does oppositional, or counterideological,

decoding of the message, subject (subject the message with ideology) the advancing ideology by the decoder? I make this point to emphasize the circular and interactive relationship of ideology and, therefore, propaganda, the interactive nature of encoding and decoding messages. Anything else, certainly determinist theories, would imply ideological mind control.

Ideology is a system of ideas and associations, mostly in the model of *values + beliefs = opinion*, which persons generate as some combination of biological and social processes. I argue ideology is a property of persons that blends, mysteriously, epistemological and ontological human mental states that further blend, mysteriously, within sociological context in all sorts of rich and complex ways. Ideology is not power or dominance in and of itself, it is something persons attempt to tailor and control as an exercise of power. Ideology can be explained by political economy, nevertheless with interesting and important exceptions. Indeed, ideology exists apart from capitalism, religion, state power, class, but does not exist apart from persons. And so, within a *values + beliefs = opinion* ideological terrain, various hegemonic values and beliefs within and outside of the superstructure generate an ideological formation. There is an element of inexplicable human behavior that creates problems whenever the articulation of social life becomes too rigid or literal. Thus, we can see anything with the massive scope of a science of ideas, a holistic view of ideology fully explained, at this point in the understanding of meaning as dead on arrival.

When examining these ideological battles, we can follow a propaganda message *backward* toward the sources or *forward* toward the intended target. If we follow the message toward the target, we are naturally drawn toward the message itself, the medium/technology, the persuasion technique it employs, its relation to facts, and ultimately the nature of its effects on the target (i.e., what the intended target's decoding of the message will presumably be). The way a target frames the message/symbols within their own ideological commitments. Here, accurate information, in the form propaganda, can be used manipulatively. If we follow the message toward the source, we are drawn to explore the ideological goals, what social, economic, or political power it serves, and the intellectual soil and institutions from which the ideological appeal grew. The now realized intelligentsia and technocrats, combined with societies' institutional power structures, cultivate the ideological soil from which competing values and ideologies grow and compete in the marketplace of loyalties.

Power

Propaganda is an appeal to enforce ideological goals and to instill values. In a sense, propaganda is an expression of power in communication, I contend a tangible expression of ideology in action. It is a technique, a way of carrying out a particular task, the powerful and influential yield when social mobilization is desired, and ideology is disseminated en masse. Power is a vast topic. My conception is geared toward the explanation of propaganda. To determine the relationship between power, its dispersal in society and where propaganda acts, I start with literature coming out of the Behaviorist tradition of the early 20th century all through to Steven Lukes' (1974/2005) *Power: A Radical View*. Lukes' updating of more traditional views with Gramscian critiques, and his notion of hegemony serves as a centerpiece that pulls together the ways in which propaganda can relate to power. Alongside Lukes' direct examination of power, I adopt Searle's project of explaining social reality, in particular how propaganda explicitly effects society as an exercise of power.

There are limits to “power,” and I would like to jettison the view that power is everything and everywhere. Its most ultra-radical form was put forth by Foucault (2000) and remains the dominant tenet in many fields today—in essence, that all knowledge and truth, class, human identity, consciousness itself are created, produced, or constituted by power relations alone, such that they are hopelessly inescapable and irresistible. Obviously, if the world were constructed so, propaganda would have no place in it. Persons would be concrete, fully constituted identities, formed by the powerful within their societies. Indoctrination would be ubiquitous. Propaganda crafted to impose persuasion techniques or instill ideologies or maintain doctrine of any kind would be pointless—the very functions of propaganda I, among others, assert it is used for.

Lukes’ (1974/2005) ideas and survey of power are built on Dahl’s (1957) *The Concept of Power*, whose proposals were critiqued in Bachrach and Baratz’s (1962) *Two Faces of Power*. Lukes’ critiques both studies and ultimately proposes that power, in fact, shows three faces or dimensions. To summarize his conception, Lukes states “that *A* exercises power over *B* when *A* effects *B* in a manner contrary to *B*’s interests” (p. 37). He argues the previous two formulations of power are too behaviorist, too limited to the observable conflicts at hand: We must note “the many ways in which *potential issues* are kept out of politics” and that “this potential [conflict] . . . may never in fact be actualized” (p. 28). Adding to overt and covert conflict, Lukes offers *latent conflict*, where *A* can prevail over *B* before political conflict ever arises. This is where the Gramscian notion of hegemony comes into play and propaganda is used to consolidate or maintain hegemony. Latent conflict, more often than not, is the battle ground of indoctrination and ideology. Hegemonic dominance can neutralize or constrain ideological competition by denoting competitors as subversive (Gramsci, 1971, p. 272) or omitting ideological positions as the Herman and Chomsky (1988) model has shown.

The three views of power are, in fact, all relevant to propaganda, which is ultimately an expression of power. Propaganda can be used overtly, covertly, or latently, and in any combination. The use of propaganda does not preclude the use of other forms of power; in most cases, propaganda amplifies them. Distributing ideological doctrine can both instigate and justify violent expressions of power, creating a synergy between the two. Bakir and colleagues’ (2019) framework for organized persuasive communication (OPC) categorizes expressions of power in the form of “deception, incentivization (offering or providing benefits) and coercion (threatening or actually inflicting costs)” (p. 313). Coercive OPC, being “the threat or infliction of costs including, but not limited to, physical force” (p. 324) is a conception that places power and action beyond the scope of my framework for communication and propaganda. Stakeholders can select the most effective options for any given situation and their goals.

Traditional literature regards *black*, *white*, and *grey propaganda* as technical terms from the Psychological Warfare Division of the Allied Forces in 1944, based on the criterion of “an acknowledgement of its source and accuracy of information” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2019, p. 17). Black propaganda being covert and likely inaccurate, white being overt and likely accurate, and grey betwixt them. However, I argue that judging the accuracy of the information should be separated from the sourcing altogether. Take the U.S. PR campaign to garner support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, based on the claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and harbored sympathies to Muslim extremists, specifically Al-Qaeda. All sources were known and official, from the highest levels of government and military to the

most prestigious newspapers and media outlets. We know this claim to be a complete fabrication. In retrospect, we would not even call this PR, but propaganda. Likewise, whistleblowers, hackers, and leakers may seek to conceal their identities for various reasons, though their information is entirely accurate. Facts and values must be judged on their own merits. This bears on a question Lukes (1974/2005) poses: Is rational persuasion a form of power and influence? He argues both yes and no. Yes, because it "is a form of significant affecting" and no "because *B* autonomously accepts *A*'s reasons," noting the Kantian problems which arise if we assume "not *A* but *A*'s reasons, or *B*'s acceptance of them, that is responsible for *B*'s change in course" (p. 36), Lukes concludes this issue could demand a book unto itself. As regards propaganda, I argue rational persuasion is a form of power and influence and should be considered "significant affecting" because there is no reason to think propaganda is *necessarily* false. In fact, rational persuasion often makes for the most effective propaganda, although the context of such an argument might be where the manipulation is conducted. Furthermore, the given political economy bears on how broadly and for how long a campaign can be sustained. In this sense, the power of capital, invoking rational persuasion or not, both reflects and produces great power and influence.

The Role of Intellectuals

Where does propaganda originate from, how does it grow from ideology, and who administers it? It is not always easy to differentiate among propaganda's intellectual roots, the message disseminator, and the various stakeholders of some ideological issue. In a battle of doctrine and ideology, there must be authors and architects. Undoubtedly, there are many reasons for people and power structures to induce ideological conformity and hegemony:

One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer ideologically the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 10)

The conquering and elaboration of ideology are in large part the product of successful propaganda campaigns. Intellectuals play a central role in crafting doctrine, which then becomes propaganda either directly, through organic elaboration, or co-option by stakeholders. These actors, typically, include but are not limited to, governments, corporations, commercial PR, academic intuitions, religious organizations, individuals—in short, those with an interest in managing public opinion. Such intellectuals can be the stakeholders themselves, and act at the behest of institutions or for their own ideological commitments. This role includes generating the ideology itself, but also crafting, modernizing, and manipulating existing ideologies for various purposes: religious imperatives, moral imperatives, social causes, and, broadly speaking, to make "various political acts acceptable to the people" (Ellul, 1965, p. 63). In any case, it is crucial to understand ideological motivations and justifications by uncovering these doctrinal roots from which propaganda grows. I argue that propaganda is not only a biased message but also an ideological appeal. This framework allows us, on the one hand, to trace backward that appeal toward its fundamental intellectual arguments, the intellectuals who construct the doctrine, and the social institutions that harness it, holds explanatory power. On the other hand, we can track forward toward

the rhetorical and emotional techniques used in propaganda messages (through framing and rhetorical analysis) and technologies (such as algorithms and bots) used to engage with specific tactics connected to an ideological strategy to reach audiences.

Intellectuals have existed in some form or another throughout history, Gramsci famously claimed: "All men are intellectuals, one could say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 9). Indeed, a specific class of "functional" intellectual emerged from the political turbulence of World War I: "It was, of course, the astounding success of propaganda during the war that opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind" (Bernays, 1928/2005, p. 54). Although I follow this emergence in the United States more closely, the Bolsheviks executed a remarkably similar program in Soviet Russia. Before the Leninist revolution, in debates with Marx, Bakunin warned of an intellectual class that began producing "political and social constructs, formulas, and theories . . . to the *ignorant crowd* as the necessary form of their future organization" and advocated "so called teachers of the people" to dictate "a new intellectual or moral outlook, a new truth, and arbitrarily give their lives a new direction . . . as though they were a blank sheet of paper," asking: "Are they to establish chairs of sociology in the villages?" (Bakunin & Shatz, 1990, p. 200). Rosa Luxemburg (1961) confirmed the "Vanguard Party" had created a bureaucratically installed intellectual class to disseminate and enforce Leninist ideology, noting "a dictatorship to be sure, however not of the proletariat but only of a handful of politicians" (p. 24).

The Vanguard counterparts in the United States strikingly shared this attitude in justifying and establishing an intellectual class to generate and dictate ideology. Lippmann (1929) expressed bluntly:

For the purposes of an election, a propaganda, a following, numbers constitute power . . . the mass of absolutely illiterate, of feeble-minded, grossly neurotic, undernourished, and frustrated individuals is very considerable, much more considerable there is reason to think than we generally suppose. Thus a wide popular appeal is circulated among persons who are mentally children or barbarians. (p. 75)

He concluded "public opinion must be organized," that it was "the task of a political science that has won its place as formulator, in advance of real decision" that "government and industry are conspiring to give political science this enormous opportunity to enrich itself and to serve" and for intellectuals to "pursue it more consciously" (Lippmann, 1929, p. 32). Bernays (1928/2005), who served on the Committee of Public Information during WWI alongside Lippmann (1929), concurred:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. (p. 37)

These men, specifically, would pave the way for the creation of PR/propagandists (in their words) both as an institutional position and intellectual discipline, they "proved that symbols are not just aesthetic ornaments but prime movers of social organization" (Peters, 1999, p. 11). The intellectual generators of

ideologies create doctrine that is disseminated as propaganda via communication networks, mass media, and pedagogy. Dewey (1930) expressed similar warnings for the United States, as Bakunin once did: "We live exposed to the greatest flood of mass suggestion that any people has ever experienced . . . the supposed need of integrated opinion and sentiment, are met by organized propaganda" (pp. 42–43). As Zuboff (2019) and others have shown, this trend has been escalated in the digital age.

These points are not only meant as critiques to the Soviet and U.S. systems but illustrate the attitude that emerges as intellectuals assume a function within institutions and society. A position that garners the power to exercise "control over both the information available and how it is interpreted," (Comor, 2017, p. 4) reflecting Innis's monopolies of knowledge. It is a moment where those who craft propaganda and PR begin to serve and defend themselves, for internal cohesion as well as external reasons. Political economy shows that these positions predominantly serve elite interests but, through its success, the PR industry has created its own political economy. While notions of the gullible masses have been replaced by more refined understandings of audience behavior, the role and position of intellectuals in the endeavor to manage public opinion has largely remained the same.

Intellectuals can also serve the ideological paradigm itself, effectively becoming fundamentalists or conservatives. To borrow Thomas Kuhn's (1962/2012) paradigm model, they grow, evolve, revolt, and generalize over time and space: "When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm's defense," continuing that with "no supra-institutional framework for the adjudication of revolutionary difference, the parties must finally resort to the techniques of mass persuasion" (p. 94). The circular nature of ideology means "intellectuals are both the main victims of the propaganda system and also its main architects" (Barsamian & Chomsky, 2001, p. 153). Lasswell (1935) remarked further "the specialist [intellectual] is less strong than he often seems, the layman is less weak" concluding that "even the propagandist is more object than subject of propaganda" (p. 187). I echo those sentiments; when ideological conflict ensues, which it inevitably does, intellectuals resort to techniques of mass persuasion to justify their claims, actions, and ideological legitimacy of themselves or the institutions they serve.

Collective Intentionality, Social Ontology, and Social Institutions

I aim to ground my theory of propaganda in what is ultimately the subject of inquiry: humans and human communication in the natural world. As a theory of society, Searle's proposals are open to critique, yet he offers an analytical framework for social life that sharpens, hones, and clarifies how certain features of propaganda communication effect, guide, and help form societal institutions and social practice. I offer a brief exposition of his theory, sticking to aspects most relevant to propaganda, the summary of which is how *collective intentionality* and *declarative speech acts* are tools that form *institutional facts* and, importantly, *status functions*, such as money, marriage, laws, governments, taxes, and corporations, but also cocktail parties, war, knighthoods, and points in football games (Searle, 1995, p. 79). Propaganda, as expression of power and ideological appeal, primarily attempts to control, tailor, or constrain the beliefs, opinions, and values we collectively agree on, within *institutional and social reality*. This conforms to Ellul's (1965) conception of propaganda: "Ideology is disseminated for the purpose of making various political acts acceptable to the people" (p. 63).

“Intrinsic features [facts] of reality are those that exist independently of all mental states, except mental states themselves, which are also intrinsic feature of reality” (Searle, 1995, p. 12). Epistemically speaking, it is crucial to distinguish between *subjective* and *objective facts* and how they relate to ontology. Despite the heavy philosophical terminology, the essential ideas are simple and easy to illustrate. There are *observer-relative* (subjective) facts and observer-independent (objective) facts. The fact that helium has two electrons is observer independent—it holds true regardless of observation. Simple math computations, $2 + 2 = 4$, are observer relative. It only has meaning relative to an observer’s interpretation. Likewise, the fact that Usain Bolt is the fastest person in the world is an observer-relative, social fact. Pain is the classic philosophical puzzle, experienced only subjectively, yet epistemically objective because it is an intrinsic biological feature of the natural world. The point being, “you can have an epistemically objective claim about a domain that is ontologically subjective” (7hinkr, 2016, 3:04). To illustrate where propaganda intersects with all this, I use Searle’s favorite example: money. It is not facts about molecules in the cellulose pulp that makes it a fact that some paper is money, but the fact of our *collective intentionality* toward it, the *status function* we ascribe it. Money can take any physical form—say of electrons on a computer database—and I will point out that a mental state is a physical form, albeit not well understood.

Intentionality is not to be confused with the common English word intention. It is a technical word defined as

that feature of representations [of the mind] by which they are *about* something or *directed at* something. Beliefs and desires are intentional in this sense because to have a belief or desire we have to believe that such and such is the case or desire that such and such be the case. (Searle, 1995, p. 7)

To elaborate further, “with consciousness comes intentionality, the capacity of the organism to represent objects and states of affairs in the world to itself” but noting “not all consciousness is intentional, and not all intentionality is conscious” (Searle, 1995, p. 7), a point I believe relevant to indoctrination and hegemony. It is out of this *intentional* process of the mind we can begin to interpret the world. It is an epistemically objective fact that “we have intrinsic intentional states. Our beliefs, for example” (Searle, 1998, pp. 91–92), although those beliefs themselves are ontologically subjective. Searle extends our individual intending to “we intend” when “we are doing so and so” in such a case that “I intend only as part of our intending” (Searle, 1995, p. 26). Searle offers the example of two people taking a walk together as a straightforward social fact involving collective intentionality. Through our “we intentions,” we generate a social reality and an important subclass of institutional facts as part of institutional reality, such as money. The status-function has a simple program, “X counts as Y in context C” (Searle, 1995, p. 28). Such and such (X) counts as money (Y), in the context of this government (C). This is the basic building block on which our collective ontology is constructed, “that all of human institutional reality is created in its initial existence by representations that have the logical form of a status function of declaration” (7hinkr, 2016, 29:31).

And, so, propaganda, through a huge chain of causation, attempts to influence our judgements of and beliefs toward objects and states of affairs in the world, sometimes in such a way that our reflexive reaction and intentional states could be subordinated to the unconscious. Standardizing beliefs and social expectations are intimately connected to the creation of ideological hegemony or ideological blocks. An

example to tie this all together is same-sex marriage. Marriage is a status function of social life—we ascribe certain rights and powers to those of married status, and those rights are endowed by human institutions of government, religion, culture. It has typically been the case in human society to restrict this marriage status function and exclude same-sex marriage from such institutions, and therefore certain rights and privileges. One can argue this is for a wide variety of reasons— in any case, at its core, for highly ideological reasons. I argue that through a massive propaganda campaign, an ideological appeal rooted in power, same-sex couples have petitioned the public to gain the status function of marriage, which was traditionally denied to them. It is a fact that more institutions, though not all, are recognizing the legitimacy of same-sex marriage as a status function in society and a wider feature of human rights. Again, this was not brought about through violence or revolution, but through moral and ideological appeals disseminated to make political acts, creating or extending status functions, acceptable to the people which, in a sort of hermeneutic circle, accounts for the creation of the status function. In other words, status functions, like money, marriages, and university degrees, derive their powers and legitimacy from our opinion of them, which is derived from our values and beliefs toward them. This is where propaganda can express power.

Discussion and Conclusion

Revisiting and fine-tuning the theoretical–philosophical foundations of propaganda, I have tried to (1) clarify the concept of propaganda and its relationship to ideology, power, intellectuals, and social institutions, as an inroad to (2) better position it in contemporary discussions of dis/mis/malinformation and computational propaganda, and (3) to differentiate from other “messages” and forms of manipulation in the digital age.

I maintained that propaganda is a tangible expression of ideology in communication, its principal purpose to enforce ideological goals, manage opinion, and consolidate loyalties. It is an attempt, a technique, to further ideological agendas that naturally “hail.” I showed how propaganda is related to ideology, the doctrines of which are created by intellectuals, at the behest of elite power or for the intellectuals’ own goals and interests. I explained that intellectuals enter ideological feedback loops, becoming conservatives of the ideology. I analyzed a power grab amounting to a paradigm shift in the 20th century, establishing monopolies of knowledge. I proposed that propaganda, effecting *values + beliefs* and, therefore, *opinion*, is central in creating, influencing, and justifying status functions in society. For example, *Black Lives Matter* is a social movement attempting to bring attention to the inexplicable killing of African Americans by law enforcement. It was met by a counter campaign, *Blue Lives Matter*, focusing on the lives and security of police officers. In fact, a range of (*X*) *Lives Matter* movements emerged. To extrapolate the framework: the opposing groups attempt propaganda/PR—increasingly using computational tools such as bots and algorithms—to manage public opinion and ideologically elaborate their positions in order to produce/maintain social powers (status functions), in this case the powers of the state versus the powers of the citizen. Parties decode oppositional messages as propaganda, favorable ones as PR for their paradigm. Identifying information as mis/dis/malinformation serves a purpose when reconciling the facts, but lacks characterization within ideological motivations—crucially, when information is adversarial but true. *Blue Lives Matter* is neither *6true*, nor simply malinformation. It is propaganda because its ideological purpose is to guide thought away from the stipulated issue at hand: the inexplicable killing of a citizen.

A conceptual-philosophical exploration of propaganda has its shortcomings. For one, it leaves unresolved questions of how to gauge ideological content. Studying the structure, features, rhetorical, emotional, and persuasive techniques of actual messages through empirical analysis of large bodies of propaganda content is undoubtedly fruitful. They allow us to see ideology at work and to understand how ideological goals, intellectuals, and social structures at the root of propaganda are manifested in and related to specific contents. The conceptual focus of this contribution does not deny or refute the relevance of investigating how propaganda operates in practice, as done within the framework of Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model and/or content analysis.

Likewise, the conceptual discussion may not help to elucidate, but does not refute, the importance of understanding how those receiving propaganda come to internalize it (i.e., become indoctrinated). Scholars have refuted Lippmann's notion of the gullible masses and have refined ideas about how media messages create cognitive, attitudinal, behavioral, and affective changes from various paradigmatic perspectives, including critical-constructivist approaches embracing the agency of the recipients of propaganda, social psychology and behavior approaches emphasizing the effects of (mediated) messages on audiences, and, recently, neuroscientific approaches. However, much remains to be explored—for instance, the effectiveness of unbridled repetition of messaging, as analyzed in studies of propaganda and PR.

Despite these shortcomings, I believe that the conceptual revision of propaganda communication helps to clarify the goals and the main actors and motivations behind ideological appeals. The framework suggests that, to gauge this goal, we must analyze whether the propaganda brings the target toward the events/facts or away from the events/facts, how they relate to claims and values, followed by what ideology is being advanced or diminished by what is proposed. The framework further allows for insightful distinctions between, for example, random misinformation and deceptive information as part of a propaganda offensive, between a random act of (terrorist) violence and an act of violence as a tool in a propaganda campaign, or between nudging campaigns aimed at changing behavior for health or welfare reasons and propaganda campaigns aimed at affecting opinions. As such, this framework can assist in updating existing models of propaganda and can provide a theoretical framework for empirical analyses of contemporary propaganda.

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