

The return of propaganda

Historical legacies and contemporary conceptualisations

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ABSTRACT

In this introductory article, we discuss the rise of the “classical” theories of propaganda, starting with an historical exposé of the concept, which traces its roots and trajectory through the field of academic analysis. Propaganda is then discussed in relation to other adjacent concepts such as soft power, public diplomacy, nation branding, fake news, and so on. In a third section, the concept of propaganda is discussed in relation to the present datafied world, marked by various forms of crises – of democracy and of the environment, for example. In the last section, the articles included in this themed issue are presented and related to the preceding historical and conceptual discussion.

KEYWORDS: propaganda, media effects, disinformation, soft power, public diplomacy

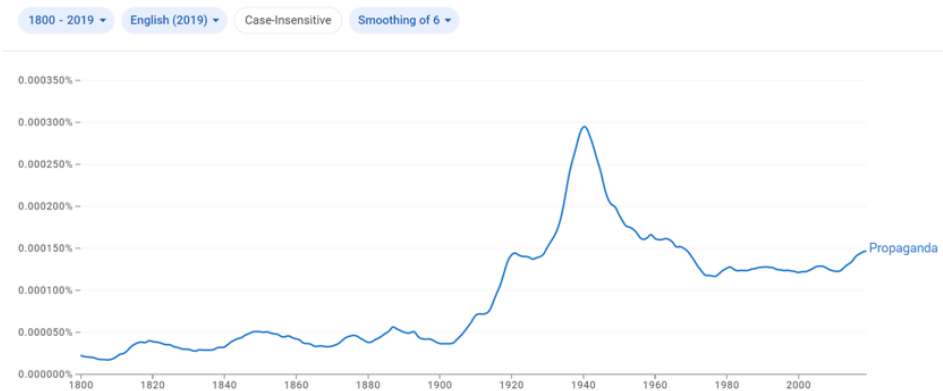
Introduction

The sounding board of worries about propaganda has often been the image or sense of social (and political) change and instability. This was the case during the first decades of twentieth century, when “propaganda” as a concept broke through to public discourse (Glander, 2000). The unpredictable power of the mass press, and the influence of emerging new media like film and radio, raised concern. Around the turn of the century, sociologists had coined a mental image about changing social order ushered in by industrialised modernity and the

breaking of traditions. The populations of the Western democracies were considered uprooted from their earlier frames of social order and common sense, their attention and volatile loyalty seemingly up for grabs by manipulative communication. Against the imagination of masses of atomised individuals, the idea about the potential of propaganda made sense. Communication became a key social problem, an overdetermined object of hopes and anxieties: “There are abundant signs of interest in international propaganda since the War of 1914”, is the opening statement in Harold Lasswell’s (1927/1971) *Propaganda Technique in World War I* – one of the classic studies on the subject.

Figure 1 illustrates how the word “propaganda” became increasingly popular in English-language literature, peaking during the two World Wars, and then slowly fading, although not disappearing entirely. This spectacular rise, relative fall, and possible “return” of the question about propaganda is a persistent key underlining theme in communication research.

FIGURE 1 Google Ngram on “propaganda” in English-language literature, 1800–2019



With World War I, fears of propaganda grew and paved the way for a heightened interest in the persuasive power of the media. Besides Lasswell, other prominent researchers pondered the various aspects of influential media. Walter Lippman (1922/1946) focused on public opinion, while Edward Bernays (1928/2005) studied propaganda from a perspective that would subsequently develop into professional practices of public relations. During World War II and the following Cold War period, the study of mass communication *effects* became a defining factor in consolidating the discipline, particularly in the US. Somewhat paradoxically, this massive empirical research effort led to a synthesis which emphasised the *weakness* of media effects and influence of mediating variables that complicated the image of strong effects of propaganda (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Klapper, 1960).

As the influence of particular campaigns and messaging strategies showed to be more complex, theorisations about “propaganda” shifted to broader, societal conceptualisations. This made sense, particularly given the fact that everyday life in Western democracies was at the same time increasingly shaped by mass culture and mass media. Jacques Ellul (1965/1973: 25), for instance, saw that the aim of propaganda was no longer to “transform an opinion but to arouse an active and mythical belief”. The critical theory informed by the Frankfurt School also informed stinging critiques of the weak effects theory, arguing that affirmative, “administrative” research interests (and research funding) had compromised and led the discipline astray (Gitlin, 1978; see also Simpson, 1994; Lazarsfeld, 1941). The *idea* of the societal, indoctrinating, hegemonic, and systemic power of mass communication remained a key factor in research informed by critical political economy. However, by the late 1980s – when Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) launched their “propaganda model” to illustrate how the mass news media contributed to the manufacturing of consent in capitalist society – the concept had fallen out of fashion. One key factor here was the internal cleavage inside critical research, between different ways of conceptualising power and communication, in political economy and cultural studies. Cultural reception theory and other approaches within media and communication research that focused on the interpretive work of audiences gained momentum, weakening the claims about propaganda and the structural power of the media industries. Some commentators (e.g., Curran, 1990) saw this as repeating the mistakes of the “weak effects” paradigm of the 1950s. Others argued that late modern societies demanded a theory of media power with more detailed and nuanced analysis of how the circulation meanings and interpretation were embedded (but could not be reduced) in structures of social power (e.g., Fiske, 1993).

This “pendulum” between claims for weak, individual, short term effects, and arguments for strong, systemic, and long-term influence of media seems to be a reoccurring feature of the debate inside communication research. It reflects the often-noted dynamics of hopes and fears that are linked to technological communication “revolutions”, with utopias of knowledge and participation, on the one hand, and dystopias about lies and manipulation, on the other. Concerns and questions about propaganda often “return” in such transitional moments. However, media developments are of course not the only cause of this oscillation of hope and fear. They become foci of attention partly because they serve as objects onto which social and political conjunctures are projected. As Figure 1 suggests, the rise of propaganda in the early twentieth century was linked to a global period of rapid social change and volatility. And while the link between wars and propaganda makes (simple and immediate) sense at the level of an existential struggle for a state or a nation, the connection can also be seen as a deeper one. Indeed, the early analyses of World War I (e.g., Bernays, 1928/2005; Bloch, 1921/2013; Laswell, 1927/1971; Lippmann, 1922/1946) were also exercises of thinking about communication and mobilisation of populations more broadly – as if the exceptional circumstances of war had provided new key lessons about “success” and failure of communication efforts in the new changing (modernised)

world. For Harold Lasswell (1927/1971), the conclusions about war propaganda led to a theory of the *need* and of engineering social consent in modern societies. As the title of his work underlines, propaganda here becomes a neutral instrument (“technique”), that had (and had to) become the “new hammer and anvil of social solidarity” (Lasswell, 1927/1971: 221). Underneath this imperative of more effective “manufacture of consent” (see Lippmann, 1922/1946: 157ff) lay the then well-spread (dominant) sociological imagination (see, e.g., DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982: 133–161) of modern “mass societies”, where mass not only referred to the size of audience but also to their mutual, atomised social relations that presumably made individuals more vulnerable and volatile.

This new social condition, then, *forced* societies (and perhaps excused their elites) to treat their own populations as a target of manipulation and engineering of opinions and consent. In “an atomized world [which] requires more strenuous exertions to co-ordinate and unify than formerly” (Lasswell 1927/1971: 222), propaganda was a necessity. And somewhat paradoxically (or cynically), Lasswell also argued that “rational”, argumentative communicative style was a key part of this seduction. As he put it elsewhere:

Most of that which was formerly could be done by violence and intimidation must now be done by argument and persuasion. Democracy has proclaimed the dictatorship of palaver, and technique of dictating to the dictator is named propaganda. (Lasswell, 1927: 631)

The rise of propaganda was, in his terms, “a reflex to the immensity, the rationality and the willfulness of the modern world” (Lasswell 1927/1971: 222). The rise of “communication professionals” (Carey, 1965; see also Peters, 1999: 10–32), then, can be seen against this instrumentalist and (at least latently functionalistic) background. Against this background, the abundance of communication expertise in societies since then is, in a sense, strong proof of the fact that “propaganda” – in the sense that Lasswell and others understood it – has not gone anywhere, but has rather been professionalised, legitimised, and often renamed.

As can be seen from Figure 1, propaganda as a term does not disappear entirely from general use after the height of its popularity during World War II. It also retains its place in academic discourse. Indeed, since the 1980s, there is a steady flow of literature that uses the concept. We can also note that one of the standard text-books of propaganda studies – Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell’s *Propaganda and Persuasion* – first published in 1986, is now in its seventh edition and widely cited (Jowett & O’Donnell, 1986/2019). Jowett and O’Donnell’s definition of propaganda has also been widely used: “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (1986/2019: 6). Although the concept of propaganda has proven a certain stability in use over the years, competing or complementing concepts have also been launched, ranging from public diplomacy and soft news to fake news and misinformation. The concept has also been specified, aiming to address a certain aspect, condition, or technique of propagation, such as computational

propaganda or cyber-propaganda. In this introductory article, we discuss these and their relation to the “classical” theories of propaganda. We start with an historical exposé of the concept, tracing its roots and trajectory through the field of academic analysis. We then discuss propaganda in relation to other adjacent concepts. In a third section, we contextualise propaganda in the datafied world, marked by various forms of crises – of democracy, of the environment, and so on. In the last section, we account for the articles in this themed issue, in the context of our historical and conceptual discussion.

The rise of propaganda as a phenomenon and research area

Even if the concept of propaganda rose to heights after World War I, the concept has a much longer history and can be found as far back as the first century BC, for example, in Marcus Tullius Cicero’s “On Divination”, where it refers to the “propagation” of religious ideas (Cull 2019: 172, n17). However, most scholars, including Jowett and O’Donnell (1986/2019), situate its origins with Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order, who in 1539 argued for “the defence and propagation of the faith”, thus bringing the concept of “propaganda fide” into the language of the church (Cull, 2019: 9–10). In 1622, Pope Gregory XV founded the *Congregatio de propaganda fide*, consisting of a committee of Cardinals responsible for foreign missions – that is, a committee for the missioning (propagation) of the true faith. With the rise of mass media and fears related to mass society in the second half of the nineteenth century, propaganda became detached from its religious contexts and became linked to an explicitly secular worry about social order and public opinion. This is when its meaning also took on negative connotations (Jowett & O’Donnell, 1986/2019: 89f), and it attracted the attention of early mass communication researchers. Two world events led to this change in meaning: the Russian Revolution and World War I.

Related to the Russian Revolution, the concept was theorised by revolutionary thinkers such as Georgi Plekhanov, who discussed it in relation to the concept of agitation:

Agitation is also propaganda, but propaganda that takes place in particular circumstances, that is in circumstances in which even those who would not normally pay any attention are forced to listen to the propagandist’s words. Propaganda is agitation that is *conducted in the normal everyday course* of the life of a particular country. Agitation is propaganda occasioned by events that are not entirely ordinary and that provoke a certain upsurge in the public mood [emphasis added]. (Plekhanov, 1891/1983: 103)

In Plekhanov’s thinking, propaganda aims to form people’s opinions and attitudes, while agitation is forming people’s actions (see also Kremer & Martov, 1896/1983: 203). Agitation and propaganda were then put into practice as tools of mass mobilisation and paved the way for the rise of the “propaganda state” of the Soviet Union (Kenez, 1985). The two concepts were combined in the practice

of *agitprop* (agitation propaganda), a concept coined in the 1920s, following the Russian Revolution, and engaging the medium of film for its purposes. Lenin famously argued that film was the most important of the arts, but in the early days of the Soviet Union, raw celluloid film was scarce, and thus film-makers often had to make do with old footage, which was reused in new combinations. This is how the cinematic practice of montage came to be developed by film-makers such as Sergei Eisenstein, who combined this cinematic practice with essayistic theorisations of it (Eisenstein, 1949/1977). Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) is probably the most widely cited example of this technique. Agitprop trains travelled the vast Soviet empire to show films to the illiterate masses, and film-makers such as Dziga Vertov and Aleksandr Medvedkin were deeply engaged in the practice (Heftberger, 2015).

These propaganda practices directly influenced the development of cinematic narration, but they can also be seen in the context of the interest at the time to think of propaganda in relation to other forms of communication, such as education, aiming to change people's minds. In their classical study, *World Revolutionary Propaganda: A Chicago Study*, Harold Lasswell and Dorothy Blumenstock (1939) analysed protests in the US during the Great Depression of the 1930s and concluded that there is only a slight difference between propaganda and education:

Propaganda is the manipulation of symbols to control controversial attitudes; education is the manipulation of symbols (and of other means) to transmit accepted attitudes (and skills). (Lasswell & Blumenstock, 1939: 10)

Their point was that what is propaganda and what is not depends on context: In one context, it can be considered education, while in another, it is seen as indoctrination. Jacques Ellul, however, cautioned against taking this analogy too far, since there is a risk that propaganda becomes a useless concept that can include any effort to communicate ideas with the intention of influencing people's attitudes, because then "everything is propaganda" (Ellul, 1965/1973: x-xi).

Thus, if propaganda was a descriptive term when it first came into use, pointing to the advocacy of a certain faith or opinion, or as a tool for mass mobilisation, it took on negative connotations in general discourse from World War I onwards. However, this also meant that attempts were made to find new descriptive terms for persuasive efforts – terms that were less negatively loaded.

Propaganda, public diplomacy, soft power, or fake news?

One of the concepts that has been used to brush up the reputation of persuasive practices in the area within public affairs is *public diplomacy*. Public diplomacy has been described as a "democratic equivalent" to propaganda (Cull, 2019: 12), or, in the words of James Pamment, as "diplomatic advertising" (Pamment, 2013: 2). The concept was coined by the American diplomat Edmund Guillon in 1967, who also admitted that he would "have liked to call it 'propaganda'", but

in the face of the negative connotations, found that improper (as cited in Cull, 2019: 12). As indicated by the position of Guillon, public diplomacy research has grown out of diplomatic practice (Pike, 2021: 7). Because of this, it often has an administrative slant to it, in the sense that it asks the questions that are posed from within the practice itself, aimed to refine the techniques of communication in the service of persuasion (for exceptions, see Pamment, 2013; Surowiec, 2017). This is a feature that it shares with many other research fields that have grown out of practice, such as journalism or education research, where former practitioners (journalists and teachers) are turning the analytical lens towards their own vocation. It often means that they are using concepts developed in practice as analytical tools, which at times can have confusing results.

If public diplomacy is a practice, then *soft power* is the resource which it controls or manages. Soft power also stems from an American tradition and was coined by political scientist Joseph Nye (2004) to describe the ability of countries to affect others with attraction and persuasion, rather than with the “hard power” of weapons or economy. Soft power is, as Nye wrote a few years later, the power of “getting others to want the outcomes that you want” (Nye, 2014: 20) – to reach hegemony by attraction rather than coercion. A more commercially oriented communicative effort that builds on attraction is nation branding, that is, the phenomenon where governments, public relations consultants, media organisations, and corporate business join forces to promote a favourable image of a particular nation-state (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2010: 79). Like public diplomacy, nation branding is a research area which has had a close relation to practice, as it has been developed by entrepreneurial scholars at business schools who are also engaged in the practice of selling their consultancy services to governments (Aronczyk, 2013). It thus shares the same problematic relation to its conceptual toolbox as research on public diplomacy.

In the realm of business studies, one also seeks to avoid the terminology of propaganda for describing the ways in which commercial companies attempt to form the image of themselves and their commodities. Instead, the concept of *information management* (Detlor, 2010) has been launched as a more neutral and descriptive term for the strategic practices of corporations. Correspondingly, from within research on international relations, the concept of *strategic narratives* has been developed. This concept opens up possibilities for some interesting observations about how various forms of discursive action are modelled or “scripted” on narrative principles, picked up from structuralist narratology and, for example, following ritualistic patterns. In such cases, social realities follow transformative patterns picked from anthropological rituals, for example, in the form of “media events” (Dayan & Katz, 1992; see also Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2022). The concept is, however, often used in a very loose sense, pointing to phenomena we would rather call discourses than narratives, since a narrative – if we follow narratologists such as Vladimir Propp (1928/1968), Tzvetan Todorov (1969), Umberto Eco (1981), and others – has a temporal structure where events and actors are linked in causal relationships and where there are temporal developments that ultimately reach narrative closure. This is also pri-

marily how the main proponents of the concept frame it (Roselle et al., 2013; Miskimmon et al., 2013), but sometimes uses of the concept do not strictly follow the recipes. In those cases, the phenomena described are more like discourses, that is, bundles of perceptions of social reality. All of the above concepts try to capture the practices of shaping people's perceptions, apprehensions, attitudes, and ideas, and in that sense, they are all forms of "meaning management", with the ultimate goal to influence (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2023). The component of effects or impacts, however, remain in all these conceptualisations, and the main difference between them is whether they point to the messages themselves (strategic narratives, fake news), the ways in which messages and information is processed (information and meaning management, public diplomacy), or the underlying resource the messages carry (soft power).

The "return" of propaganda = datafication + global crises?

If global social and political upheaval is the necessary context for understanding the breakthrough of propaganda to the vocabulary more than a hundred years ago, the same applies to the recent decades of our time. World War I and the consequent rise of fragile and unstable democracies can be considered a reaction to the crisis of the European imperialist world order (see, e.g., Polanyi, 1948; Hobsbawn, 1994; Arrighi, 1994). In comparison, our context today is the trembling of the paradigm of neoliberal globalisation that seems to have reached its limits. At the very least, we are witnessing a moment of transformation and an ideological struggle around the ideas, identities, beliefs, and values that Western democracies – at least in their self-understanding – have lived by.

Clearly, in international politics, neoliberal capitalism is no longer the self-evidently dominant world-shaping power. But more profoundly, the *external* limits and the crisis of reaching them are ecological, and deeply systemic. As several critical commentators have pointed out (Ghosh, 2016, 2021; Latour, 2018; Malm, 2016; Mitchell, 2011), the historical link between capitalism and democracy (and colonialism) is embedded in practices and logics of extraction in general and in deep dependency of fossil fuels and minerals. This history has now become a challenge of the future, fundamentally shaping our understanding on what lies ahead. It is a key underlying factor of our immediate political – and military – conflicts. As several articles in this issue illustrate (see Löfgren's and Dahlberg's contributions), this has raised the stakes and increased the investment in manipulative and strategic communication. The global crisis context points to the ways in which we are the targets of our propaganda, and it also begs the question about the ways in which we play along with it. In this sense, a "return" of the question about propaganda – however uneasy it might make us about our own values and ways of life – might be a welcome challenge.

Internally, recent decades have also seen a gradual but steady transformation of twentieth-century social contracts of Western democracies. We have witnessed an increase of social inequalities inside national political communities (Piketty,

2022; Savage, 2021), carving out room for new political divisions and alliances (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Public disputes about uncertain futures and about rights and membership in societies have not only changed the political landscapes, but also increasingly drawn previously stable policy principles, and constitutive (and constitutional) features on democracy into political play. Although in many Nordic countries general surveys still portray populations as having high levels of trust in legacy social institutions, examples from elsewhere show that the sense of inequality and loss of achieved cultural and social status have carved out new space for rhetorical political action. (In different ways, the articles by Kellokoski, Grönvall, and Ekman & Widholm can be situated in this context.)

At the same time (with increasing ecological, economic, and social uncertainty), the communication *infrastructure* that provided the background for earlier theorisations of propaganda (and its more benign derivatives) has undergone a change (which is historically best compared to the spread of the printing press). For communication scholars, this has meant an imperative to come to grips with yet another communication revolution, where earlier structures and practices are becoming reinvented in a new context. In relation to explicit research on propaganda, this is reflected in the attempts to define what is new about the current situations. One such conceptualisation is *computational propaganda*, which has gained some traction lately. Defined as a communicative practice that utilises “algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks” (Woolley & Howard, 2019: 4), computational propaganda situates strategic uses of digital communication into the context of data-driven and platformed media infrastructures. As a wave of critical scholars of datafication (see, e.g., Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Turow, 2011; Wu, 2016; Zuboff, 2019) have pointed out, the contemporary potentials and practices of profiling, targeting, manipulating, and even anticipating opinions, desires, and behaviour of population segments have risen to a qualitatively new level. Dreams about utilising predictive analytics to help shape public opinion have a long thread in political, communication, and computer science (see, e.g., Lepore, 2020), but the massive harvesting of everyday data, combined with an increase of computational power, have changed these fantasies into practices, with manifest social consequences. Computational propaganda also involves other concepts such as dis- and misinformation and fake news (see Farkas, 2023), and specifically focuses on political communication with the use of bots, so-called troll armies, fake social media accounts, and so on (see, e.g., Howard, 2020).

While this epochal shift in infrastructural realities poses qualitatively new questions, it can also serve to illustrate the need to stay connected to the rich history of communication research, political science, and social theory. For instance, it is not far-fetched to suggest that our current debates about echo chambers, filter bubbles, and political polarisation (e.g., Sunstein, 2018; Bruns, 2018; Bail, 2021) reveals familiar (intellectual) tendencies. One instinct of an academic is to raise abstract concerns (based on critical theory or conservative values, or often a mix of these); another is to dig into to empirical realities (and

often find that things are more complex). Analyses of networked propaganda (Benkler et al., 2018) illustrate this well. The pendulum has swung between cautions about the strong effects of propaganda (communication or media or technological change) and reminders about how such questions must be situated in different social contexts. (In this issue, the work of Malmberg, Hyzen, and Nicolai can be seen as part of this ongoing discussion.)

At the same time, the discursive struggles take new forms and are utilising new kinds of strategies. British-Ukrainian journalist Peter Pomerantsev (2019) has thus concluded that much of what we are witnessing today, especially the communication coming out of Russia, “is not propaganda”, but something else: a will to spread confusion, uncertainty of facts, polarisation, and the widespread belief that “nothing is true” (Pomerantsev, 2014). He does, however, not come up with an alternative concept for this practice.

We first began pondering this themed issue towards the end of 2021, thinking about framing our question with some of the recent popular buzz words and concerns of media studies, such as dis- and misinformation, fake news, and so on. The idea to pose the question about the “return” of propaganda was not to suggest that propaganda would necessarily offer a more analytically detailed lens to the current media landscape. Rather, we thought the *question* about propaganda – with its important role as a concern that has shaped media research – would provide possibilities for new connections and perspectives and bring together a diverse group of authors. Our point about the “return” was (deliberately) ambiguous, offering a chance for authors to ponder the role of the media in contemporary communication processes and to think around the fact that general discourses about “effects”, “impact”, and “influence” do not seem to be going away. Should we “return” to theories and definitions and discussions about propaganda? How would this allow us to ask new questions about current communication practices? And so on. Of course, during the editorial process of this issue, the practices, influences, and consequences of propaganda have also “returned” with a new force because of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the intense discussions around it in mass and niche media. Tragically and forcefully, that takes us back to one of the roots the notion of “propaganda” in its modern meaning: societies at war and conflict (between themselves and internally), where communication is a tool of warfare just as other means of combat (articles by Horbyk et al. and Askanius & Brock in this issue highlight this).

The articles in this issue

This themed issue opens with three articles that, in different ways, take stock of the relevance of propaganda research (tradition). Tarmo Malmberg’s article, “Media studies, Le Bon’s psychology of crowds, and qualitative-normative research on propaganda, 1880–2020”, provides a long-range perspective of the field of communication research. He argues that the recent shift in scholarly interpretation on the Internet – “from a utopia of free speech in the 1990s to a nightmare of spreading propaganda and disinformation in the 2010s” – is

an invitation to look back to the intellectual context some hundred years ago. The foundations of propaganda studies were laid then, and mass media was put into large-scale propaganda use by governments and other social actors. Malmberg goes back to the work of Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) and tracks key themes on a long arch of this research tradition. Joseph Nicolai, in his article, “Guarding information’s Other: Theorising beyond information and communications technologies for disinformation”, takes his point of departure from sociology of knowledge and provides a critical reading of some key turns in the twentieth-century study of information and propaganda. He provides an excursus of some episodes, or moments, through which the propaganda analysis (à la Lasswell) that emerged between the World Wars transformed into the doctrines of “free-flow of information” during the Cold War. Nicolai discusses how a focus on “information” as the core of communication trouble seems to have been carried to present concerns and analysis of dis-, mis-, and malinformation and fake news. Nicolai calls this tendency the “othering” of information, a process that tends to provide reductionist ahistorical approaches to information troubles. Instead, he argues that the current moment demands that we “not only locate the political and cultural contestations of information and informational omissions, but also to speculate on the emancipatory potential in the world to come”. Aaron Hyzen’s article, “Propaganda and the Web 3.0: Truth and ideology in the digital age”, elaborates the concept of propaganda and situates it to the contemporary media landscape. Hyzen suggests an analytical model that highlights four important aspects of digitalised management of public opinion: 1) the role of true information in propaganda, 2) the influence of different contexts on the distributed “message” on campaigns, 3) the importance of repetition, and 4) the part played by the “audiences” themselves in the cyclical flows of digital information. In addition to suggesting a model for unpacking the complexity of questions about contemporary propaganda, Hyzen’s model points to fundamental questions about the way datafied communication infrastructures enable propaganda practices to infiltrate the very formation of “opinions”.

After these theoretical reflections, the two following contributions carry the debate from theory and history to the realm of acute contemporary international political realities. Roman Horbyk, Yana Prymachenko, and Dariya Orlova also build a historical arc from the Cold War to the present in their article, “The transformation of propaganda: The continuities and discontinuities of information operations, from Soviet to Russian active measures”. Drawing from a uniquely interesting archive material from Kyiv, they juxtapose Soviet Union KGB manuals from the 1960s and 1970s with the recent effort of Russian propaganda, the Secondary Infektion campaign (2014–2020). Their analyses highlight the continuities and discontinuities between two distinct periods that were characterised by keen interest to develop new and sophisticated techniques of propaganda. Horbyk, Prymachenko, and Orlova’s analysis points to the strong legacy of KGB practices, but also underlines how new contexts of “deep mediatisation” has shaped the techniques. Maria Brock and Tina Askanius’s article, “Raping turtles and kidnapping children: Fantasmatic logics of Scandinavia in Russian

and German anti-gender discourse”, also describes and analyses contemporary propaganda efforts. They examine the social, political, and fantasmatic logics behind the discourses about Scandinavian people and societies. Drawing from a project studying anti-gender movements in Russia and Germany, Brock and Askanius show how Scandinavian societies are presented as imagined places of sexual and moral decay and as a gender dysphoric dystopia by actors in the global anti-gender movement. They illustrate this through an analysis of a propagandist content about the vulnerability of children in Nordic societies, showing how such campaigns seek to fuel moral outrage among domestic audiences in Russia and Germany.

These are followed by three articles that in different ways analyse and tackle the widespread debate about political and populist communication challenges inside democratic societies. Mattias Ekman and Andreas Widholm’s contribution, “Media criticism as a propaganda strategy in political communication”, looks at strategic attacks on news media institutions and journalists as an increasingly common feature of contemporary mediated politics. Drawing from an analysis of the Twitter feeds of Swedish members of parliament, Ekman and Widholm identify the politicians’ strategies to criticise the news media, and they show that these tropes particularly circulate among right-wing politicians and target public service media in Sweden. Understanding the weaponising of media criticism as tool for political propaganda also raises the issue for media scholars: How are we to develop a critical analysis of mainstream media – a task that still remains crucial – when such ideas are actively repurposed for political propaganda? John Grönvall investigates the *reactions* to the concerns about fake news and information disorder. His article, “Fact-checkers and the news media: A Nordic perspective on propaganda”, focuses on the role of several Nordic fact-checking organisations and actors, situating their work in the Nordic social and political context. Analysing interviews with various actors – journalistic institutions, media literacy organisations, and various national policymakers – Grönvall suggests that fact-checkers are broadly recognised as an important complimentary element in the struggle to sustain a resilient media and communication environment for Nordic democracies. At the same time, the analysis reveals increasing worries about the disruptive effects of developing technology and artificial intelligence and the ways in which such developments can disempower the fact-checking movement and actors. Grönvall offers an example of how questions of propaganda must be posed at systemic, institutional, and policy levels. Sustaining the epistemic capacity of democratic societies demands differentiated, specialised actors – and their interplay must be supported by policy decisions. Ilari Kellokoski’s contribution, “Persuasion through people: The rhetorical categories of documentary subjects in Michael Moore’s films”, takes us to the analysis of concrete rhetorical techniques. He looks at the work of one of the most influential and controversial documentarians of recent decades, Michael Moore, whose work has tackled many of the defining issues of recent decades, ranging from gun violence and the war on terror to the American election and environmental issues. Kellokoski zooms in on a particular slice of Moore’s storytelling and

provides an analysis of how documentary subjects – people who are portrayed in the films – are used as devices of persuasion. Kellokoski suggests that despite his leftist reputation (and often messaging as well), Moore’s rhetorical techniques share key similarities with right-wing populist communication: Lay persons are used to trivialise expert knowledge, anti-elitist sentiments are frequent, and news media and journalists are portrayed as “partly untrustworthy sources of ridiculous statements”.

The theme issue closes with two articles that highlight the global crisis of sustainability and strategic or manipulative communication strategies. Leif Dahlberg’s article, “The language of late fossil capital”, coins the term in the title to point to the ways in which the oil industry has been working to avoid and delay action in taking responsibility for global climate change. Dahlberg specifically focuses on the last few decades when fossil fuel industries have tried to claim that they are in the forefront of emissions mitigation efforts, providing “solutions” and helping individual citizens to cut down “their” carbon footprint. As these efforts have taken place while the industry has been fully and scientifically aware of the environmental effects of their business, such communication strategies amount to an historically unique scale of manipulation and distortion that has harmed the whole globe. Inspired by the example of German linguist Victor Klemperer’s 1947 study of the metamorphosis of the German language during the Third Reich, Dahlberg considers these massive campaigns as a (scarily) successful attempt to corrupt our thinking about climate change at the level of everyday language. As a counter move, Dahlberg provides a detailed analysis of the rhetoric techniques of these campaigns by focusing on the evidence presented in ongoing legal court cases that are challenging the fossil industry and trying to bring fossil fuel companies to justice for their conscious manipulation of their public role. Isabel Löfgren zooms into the intersection between the green shift, and the Swedish mining industries’ public relations efforts in her article, “What would a Swedish mine be without a party? On metals, minerals, and love during the “green” transition: Climate propaganda in The Swedish Mine advertising campaign”. Her critical analysis of The Swedish Mine advertising campaign illustrates how the affective registers of progressive urban audiences are addressed to invite acceptance for mining. Löfgren shows and suggests “green” industrial progress is aesthetically advanced by tokenising multiculturalism, fetishising consumption, and romancing national identity – and people on social media and activists have responded to this. She argues that such forms of propaganda reach the limits of the engineering of public consent for a “green” transition when they begin using emotions as sites of “cognitive extraction” to cover technological and capitalist imperatives that ultimately promote Sweden as a leading mining nation.

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