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Media 304

Propaganda Theory: The Modern Explanation

Imagine a young German in 1935, they walk downtown and see videos on the TV of Adolf Hitler. They see anti-Semitism in posters, flyers, and through culture without even realizing it. By 1937 they self-identify as a Nazi and are fighting for the eradication of Jewish people in Germany and across the world. Across the map imagine a young American in 1942 watching videos about why America is fighting in World War II. This young American is afraid yet empowered to take down dictators. Although these imaginations paint different images, both young boys were influenced by propaganda. Post-WWII propaganda would be studied in mass amounts in what is today known as propaganda theory.

Propaganda theory can be broken into three main sections. According to *Mass Communication Theory,* white, black, and grey propaganda are the most common. White propaganda is withholding the truth, black is deliberate lying and strategized transmission of lies, and grey is the transmission of ideas that may or may not be true (Baran & Dennis, 2020, pp. 46-7). Propaganda theory began taking off with Edward Bernay, the father of modern public relations. He believed that to encompass all of a democracy the idea of the freedom to persuade should be added. Bernay’s said, “Only by mastering the techniques of communication can leadership be exercised fruitfully in the vast complex that is modern democracy” (Baran & Dennis, 2020, p. 48). However, in 1925 pre-WWII Harold D. Lasswell and Harold Lippman gave explanations of propaganda theory. Harold Laswell said, “Propaganda is a management of collective attitudes by the manipulations of significant symbols” (1927). Lippmann agreed with many aspects of Lasswell’s theory and offered ways to “fix” the problem of propaganda. He believed that there should be an external aspect of government that decides what information is published and what information is not published (Baran & Dennis, 2020, p.54). To oppose Lasswell and Lippman, John Dewey wrote a rebuttal to the prior published ideas on propaganda theory. He did not think that media was as scary as others made it out to be. He thought that people could filter out propaganda if taught the write mechanisms (Baran & Dennis, 2020, p. 55). While these ideas have a deep root in history, they are still being studied today.

In 2007, researchers Brian A. Patrick from the University of Toledo and A. Trevor Thrall from the University of Michigan looked at the Iraq war and its relationship to propaganda theory instead of the hegemonic perspective. Hegemonic perspective is, “Ideological hegemony occurs when an individual takes part in reinforcing power structures and societal ideas willingly, even when these structures and ideas are harmful or silencing for those without access to power” (Spinetta, 2014). Some argue that Bush often empowered the media to think of the causes of war instead of what was happening currently. This was supposed to be used to gain public support. However, according to Patrick and Thrall, Bush did not seem to control the media as he should have. They had two central questions, “Did President Bush fail to dominate the news for some reason? If so, hegemony-inspired theories are dealt a surprise blow, having failed to identify the conditions under which this might happen. Or, on the other hand, did Bush control the news but somehow fail to lead public opinion?” (Patrick and Thrall, 2007). For both of these questions, the researchers argued against the idea of a hegemonic perspective. Instead, they argued for classical propaganda theory. Patrick and Thrall said, “We argue that although the concept of hegemony offers considerable insight into the dynamics of the public sphere it has mischaracterized the presidential use of propaganda and its impact on public opinion during war” (2007). To test their hypothesis, Patrick and Thrall used coders to look at New York Times articles to find how often American casualties were listed on the front page between Jan. 2003 and Jun. 2004. They had a near 95% result in their findings. In addition to this, they used Nexis to find out how many stories related to weapons of mass destruction, 9/11, and insurgency. The coders also used Vanderbilt Television News Archives to look at “abstracts of all Iraq related stories from every other night’s ABC News between March 2003 and June 2004” (Patrick and Thrall, 2007). The researchers also hired coders to listen to President Bush’s speeches and find any information where he talked about the war on terror and how to progress in the future. Finally, the researchers used Polls from the Roper Center’s iPoll archive. They were able to find “most consistent tracking of American support for the war” (Patrick and Thrall, 2007). After all of the coder's analysis, they found that the president does have the ability to make people believe an idea despite critics. However, “as classical propaganda theory suggests, using the media to influence the public becomes more difficult as the administration’s control over information erodes, and the public slowly grows aware of discrepancies between official

rhetoric and reality.,” (Patrick and Thrall, 2007). Essentially, after a while, people become aware that things are not how the President may say they are. It is then that their propaganda does not work and society realizes the truth.

The truth was something in question during the 2016 election. Researchers Zainulabdin Khawaja and Ali Khudejah of Lahore University of Management Sciences in Pakistan researched the eighteen most popular social media posts circulating in the 2016 election. In their research, they looked at these post's relationship to propaganda theory. Their research was completed and published this year in the Journal of Applied Communications Research. This research was completed to find out what compelled people to believe fake news. According to Khawaja and Khudejah, “This study conducts a qualitative textual analysis of the most popular fake news stories on Facebook during the election to determine the key tropes that may have influenced readers’ cognitive beliefs and led to their mass propagation" (2021). To complete this, their research was broken up into five sections: a brief discussion on fake news, a description of their methodology, an exploration of six propaganda features found, an analysis of why these were found, and a proposal of future research. Specifically, the methodology that was used in this test was heavy textual analysis. This analysis uncovered the latent meaning behind posts – it looked at possible deeper cultural or ideological philosophies pushed. In addition to this, the possible impact that these texts had on people was observed. The researchers were the main participants in this study. They started by using a “long preliminary soak” (Khawaja and Khudejah, 2021) in the data. According to Khawaja and Khudejah, “It was noted that all of the stories came from either fake news organizations or hyperpartisan websites, and all but two of the stories were overtly anti-Clinton in their theme” (2021). The researchers were able to find that there was the use of abstract terms, figureheads, grouping of the "in" or "out" crowd, special focus on a particular time, not the future, and an emphasis on conflict. Their research helped to prove that key aspects of propaganda theory are still relevant. Khawaja and Khudejah state, “In this study, we found evidence of propagandist message features/cues in fake news on social media, which likely activated the effect, self-confirmation, effort and reputation/authority heuristics in the target audience” (2021). They used their research to propose further research to see why people think that fake news is easier to believe than real news.

In the 2020 election year, families were pinned against each other. If someone supported Biden and not Trump, they might not talk to their Trump-supporting family members. Elections are always heated. However, the media played an important role in the election cycle that I would study. If I were to publish research, mine would be on the relationship between fake news and propaganda theory. My objective would be to conclusively prove that there is a relationship between fake news and propaganda. For instance, “news agencies” like News Max are producing black or grey propaganda and people are absorbing it like a sponge. If someone points this out, viewers of an agency like News Max say that they are wrong and have no idea what they are talking about.

The specifics of my proposal are as follows. I would survey students on a college campus to find what their news habits are if they believe in propaganda, and if they would consider themselves to be victims of propaganda. Additional questions that I would ask are:

* Do you watch News Max or read the New Yorker or Slate?
* Would you consider yourself to be a victim of fake news, confirmation bias, or propaganda?
* What is your political ideology? Has a politician encouraged you to obtain this news source?
* Do you fact-check items news that you intake?

After the survey, I would present them with independently verified articles that they may have seen and show them it is fake and technically propaganda. I would find what their reaction to this is and document it as well. I hypothesize that people would watch or read extreme news and not consider it propaganda. I believe they would challenge basic principles and think that I am just a member of the "fake news." This is discouraging to someone who wants to eventually be a member of the press. However, I believe these would be the results.

Propaganda theory is an interesting theory that influences people every day without them realizing it. Propaganda dates back to before WWII. However, it was widely studied after events took place like in the introduction; innocent children were persuaded to join the war or worse persuaded to hate an entire religious group. Researchers Brian A. Patrick from the University of Toledo and A. Trevor Thrall from the University of Michigan showed that propaganda is still relevant in today’s wars and conflicts. Researchers Zainulabdin Khawaja and Ali Khudejah illustrated the impact of propaganda on a modern election. This inspired my research proposition. Propaganda was the most interesting theory I learned in this class. It should be discussed in the future.

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