

Chapter 51

Persuasion and Propaganda in War and Terrorism

Thomas Steinfatt
University of Miami, USA

Dana Janbek
Lasell College, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the use of propaganda during times of war, prejudice, and political unrest. Part one distinguishes between persuasion and one of its forms, propaganda. The meaning-in-use of the term 'propaganda' is essential to understanding its use over time. Part two presents relevant examples of propaganda from the past several centuries in the United States and Europe. These examples include episodes from World War I and II, among others. Propaganda is not a new tool of persuasion, and learning about its use in the past provides a comparison that helps in understanding its use in the present and future. Part three looks at recent examples of how propaganda occurs in actual use in online terrorist mediums by Al-Qaeda and by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

PROPAGANDA AS HUMAN COMMUNICATION

Propaganda is useful in a dictatorship, but essential in a democracy. It is an ancient tool used by state and non-state actors during times of peace and of war. The messages used by power groups and by those aspiring to power are seldom random statements made in haste and anger.

This chapter considers the use of propaganda during times of war and power struggles. The introduction to propaganda may serve as background to introduce considerations as to how terrorist groups have operated prior to their introduction by newer terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in current online forums. Terrorist groups thrive on disseminating propagandistic content to their followers. Thus, a review of how propaganda has been used historically by governments and individuals should assist in understanding how it is used today by modern terrorist organisations. Most writings on terrorism focus on the present and seldom borrow from historical examples in explaining the how and why of terrorism. It is important to remember that terrorist groups did not invent

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propaganda. This chapter offers a unique perspective in thinking about terrorism which is one of the great challenges that faces societies today.

The first part of this chapter traces propaganda into its earliest forms. It delves into the various definitions of propaganda and adopts one for our discussion here. It then proceeds to discuss propaganda in specific terms through a number of historical examples starting with the late 1800s. While there are thousands of examples one could use, the authors focus on 11 cases, ten of which we regard as propaganda cases and one case we do not. In considering modern day terrorist communication habits, the authors invite readers to link what is happening today in the terrorism world to some of the examples shared here.

Propaganda is a form of persuasion and persuasion is a form of communication. Communication among humans began about 500,000 years ago in its spoken form, and at least several hundred thousand years later in its written form. Humans use words to bring objects and ideas into our minds, not just into our hands. Words do not ‘mean’, in the sense of having a fixed meaning such that a call to arms or a call to peace will have the same or even necessarily similar meanings to others who hear or read the same messages. Only people have the power to create meaning, and that meaning is in their minds. Meaning is phenomenological, not physical. Meanings are in people, not in words.

Written symbols developed about 30,000 years ago, likely as methods of keeping track of numbers of sheep, harvests, debts, and similar important items. Most languages and societies we know about necessarily had a written form, which provided humanity with much of our knowledge of those cultures and societies. Oral culture and language survived only in stories, and these changed somewhat with almost every telling.

The surviving pictograph records of many early societies provide evidence of systems of belief illustrating the prowess and skills of the hunters among meat eating groups, and depictions concerning beliefs and conceptions of the weather and seasons in agricultural societies. Without outside corroboration, it is difficult to tell if the hieroglyphs are accurate representations of the abilities of the hunters, and of the size and methods of the harvest to bring food to their respective groups, or if they are exaggerations of what commonly occurred. Exaggerations and misrepresentations, to the extent they occurred, might represent simply the artistic license of the artists. But they could also be the earliest form of propaganda as the term is commonly used today.

What evidence is there that might suggest that the early messages that survived were intended as relatively accurate depictions, or if they tended towards the exaggerative end of the scale? What would suggest that they were relatively accurate, or that alternately they were tending towards the propagandistic? The modern notion of ‘propaganda’, including its principles and how to recognise, defend against, and create it, developed much later.

Propaganda has not always been a negative term. Some conceptions and definitions have equated propaganda with any forms of mass messages. And in some languages spoken today, the term closest in meaning to propaganda is advertising. The term is not necessarily seen as negative in several Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries. Though there were many instances in history where propaganda was considered to be a positive term by those producing it, only two of these are commonly cited as examples today. These are the Roman Catholic Church in the 17th century, and quite independently, the beginnings of Russian Communism in the 1920s. ISIS likely considers its propaganda as positive.

The first known use of the term propaganda as a positive formal concept in the Western world occurred through its use in the Latin title of the newly formed Council of Bishops, created in the 17th century by Pope Gregory XV. This *Congregation de propaganda fide*, or *Congregation for Propagation of the Faith* of the Roman Catholic Church, was a formal recognition by the Church that conversion to Roman Ca-

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