

The Power of Western Propaganda

IAN SINCLAIR deconstructs the former executive editor of Le Monde's assertion that propaganda is what 'they' — Russia and other official enemies — do, not something the West dirties its hands with

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Guardian columnist and leader writer Natalie Nougayrede wrote an op-ed last month examining propaganda in our supposed age of "lies and distortion."

Focusing on "Russian propaganda" and "Russian meddling" in the West's political systems, Nougayrede argued

"citizens who live in an authoritarian, disinformation-filled environment deal daily with the reality of propaganda in ways we can't fully experience, because we live outside of it."

The former executive editor of Le Monde newspaper in France couldn't be clearer. Propaganda is what "they" — Russia and other official enemies — do, not something the West dirties its hands with.

In actual fact, as academics David Miller and William Dinan argue in their 2007 book *A Century of Spin*, sophisticated propaganda has played a central role in Western societies, particularly the United States, since the early 20th century. US dissident Noam Chomsky calls this "thought control in a democratic society."

As the "father of public relations" Edward Bernays explained in his 1928 PR manual,

"The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society ... it is the intelligent minorities which need to make use of propaganda continuously and systematically."

This echoes the thoughts of another influential intellectual of the period, Walter Lippmann, who believed the elite needed to be protected from the "bewildered herd" — the general public. How? By "the manufacture of consent."

Indeed the term "public relations" is itself a brilliant bit of spin, with Bernays noting:

"Propaganda got to be a bad word because of the Germans ... using it [in 1914-18]. So what I did was to try to find some other words. So we found the words Council of Public Relations."

As the quotes from Bernays and Lippmann highlight, Dinan and Miller say:

“Public relations was created to thwart and subvert democratic decision making” — to “take the risk of out of democracy,” to paraphrase the title of the seminal 1995 book written by Australian academic Alex Carey.

With the US and UK at the heart of the global advertising and marketing industries and corporations funding think tanks and huge lobbying efforts, today the general public faces hundreds of thousands of talented professionals spending billions trying to influence their thoughts and actions.

For example, in 2013, The Guardian’s Suzanne Goldenberg reported that, between 2002 and 2010, conservative US billionaires had covertly provided £86 million to more than 100 groups casting doubt about the science behind climate change.

“Americans are now being exposed to more public relations than ever before,” Sue Curry Jensen, professor of media and communication at Muhlenberg College, wrote on The Conversation website last year.

Western governments become especially interested in manipulating public opinion during wartime. In 1990, we had the confected story about Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait throwing babies out of incubators, masterminded by the US PR firm Hill & Knowlton.

In the late 1990s, Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service carried out Operation Mass Appeal aimed at gaining support for sanctions and war against Iraq.

Stories were planted in the foreign media “with the intention that they would then feed back into Britain and the US,” British historian Mark Curtis explained in his book *Unpeople: Britain’s Secret Human Rights Abuses*.

In 2002-3, the British government carried out a long campaign, complete with dossiers, sexed-up intelligence and dirty tricks at the United Nations, to persuade the British public to back the invasion of Iraq — what Curtis calls “a government propaganda campaign of perhaps unprecedented heights in the post-war world.”

In 2011, the public was told that Nato intervention in Libya was essential to stop Libyan government forces massacring civilians in Benghazi.

Five years later, the House of Commons foreign affairs committee’s investigation into the UK role in the conflict concluded that “the proposition that Muammar Gaddafi would have ordered the massacre of civilians in Benghazi was not supported by the available evidence.”

The military itself is a huge source of propaganda. In 2016, the Mirror reported that the British armed forces employ 122 press officers and spend £41.4m on press and public relations.

Across the pond the Pentagon spends “nearly £431m annually on public relations” in an attempt “to shape public opinion,” according to Chatham House’s Micah Zenko.

It is likely US propaganda is directed at the UK population as well as the public. For example,

in 2010, Wikileaks published a US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) memo proposing how European support for Nato mission in Afghanistan could be sustained.

Concerned that “indifference” to the war in nations like France and Germany “might turn into active hostility,” the memo recommends “a consistent and iterative strategic communication program across Nato troop contributors.”

This will create “a buffer” to future opposition, thus “giving politicians greater scope to support deployments in Afghanistan.”

“Afghan women could serve as ideal messengers in humanising the ISAF [International Security Assistance Forces] role in combating the Taliban,” the CIA notes.

“Outreach initiatives that create media opportunities for Afghan women to share their stories... could help to overcome pervasive scepticism among women in Western Europe toward the ISAF mission.”

Though the liberal view is of a media that is cantankerous and highly critical of power, some basic facts suggest something else is going on. “Research indicates that as much as 75 per cent of US news begins as public relations”, Curry Jansen notes.

Investigative journalist Nick Davies confirmed similar figures for the UK press in his 2008 book *Flat Earth News*. In addition, in the US there are now five PR people for every reporter.

More broadly, Chomsky has long noted that mainstream news media play a key role in relaying corporate and government propaganda to the general public. In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward Herman and Chomsky highlight an “observable pattern of indignant campaigns and suppressions, of shading and emphasis, and of selection of context, premises, and general agenda” which “is highly functional for established power and responsive to the needs of the government and major power groups.”

This brings us back to Nougayrede, who has been spreading fake news and propaganda about the West’s involvement in the Syrian conflict.

In August 2015, she wrote in the *Guardian* that President Obama has “refrained from getting involved in Syria,” noting that “the US has this year found only 60 rebels it could vet for a train-and-equip programme.”

In the real world, mainstream newspaper reports had already noted the US and UK had been working with Saudi Arabia and Qatar to send in hundreds of tons of weapons to Syrian rebels.

Moreover, in June 2015, the *Washington Post* estimated that the CIA Timber Sycamore programme in Syria — “one of the agency’s largest covert operations” — was spending £720m a year and had trained and equipped 10,000 rebels.

Pushing for Western military intervention in July 2015, Nougayrede highlighted what she saw as the hypocrisy of the anti-war left in the West, saying

“there have been no significant street demonstrations against the war that

Assad and his allies have waged on Syrian civilians.”

Chomsky explored the laser-like focus many intellectuals had for the crimes of opposite states in his 1992 book *Detering Democracy*.

“Fame, Fortune and Respect await those who reveal the crimes of official enemies,” he noted, while “those who undertake the vastly more important task of raising a mirror to their own societies can expect quite different treatment.”

There are, of course, very real consequences for those criticising the government in authoritarian states, so it’s understandable why commentators living under oppressive governments might toe the party line.

Nougayrede, on the other hand, continues her Western power-friendly crusade against the West’s official enemies freely of her own volition, no doubt thinking she is a questioning, adversarial commentator — a perfect illustration of the power of Western propaganda.

As George Orwell once said,

“Circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks the whip, but the really well-trained dog is the one that turns somersaults when there is no whip.”

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