

Propaganda

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The symbolic power of the state centrally depends on managing the relationship between media and politics.¹ At the centre of this process is the operation of propaganda. Propaganda aims to shift public perceptions of or obscure the relations of ruling. Despite popular conspiracy theories, this is far from a seamless process. In her path-breaking study, *Propaganda and Counter-Terrorism* rather than focus on media texts Emma Louise Briant forensically analyses the ‘messy’ informal processes of interstate and intrastate dynamics, primarily anglo-American, of propaganda as a sociological process.

In order to reconstruct the elite narrative of the ‘war on terror’ Briant managed to access difficult to reach social agents adept at staying out of the limelight. A broad range of normally obscure informants were interviewed or communicated with, including public relations professionals, journalists, foreign policy, military and intelligence officials.

By focussing on sociological processes, Briant explodes myths about propaganda as a smoothly-oiled machine that functions through carefully calibrated ends-means deliberations. Instead, propaganda is socially shaped by informal as well as formal relations of individuals and institutions. As the propaganda apparatus mushroomed with the ‘war on terror’ the coordination and integration of diverse organisational bureaucracies and cultures was beset by informal rivalries and institutional positioning. This was especially apparent for the lumbering US apparatus compared to the smaller, better integrated and more nimble UK’s ‘Strategic Communication’, though even here rival interests struggle with each other to protect their independence, from the Cabinet Office, diplomats, MI6, Ministry of Defence, Foreign Office, Home Office, through to ‘embedded’ news journalists.

In the US, communication tended to be contained behind the organisational walls of individual governmental agencies, what Briant calls ‘stovepipes’, preventing effective coordination across the propaganda apparatus. Different national, military and institutional cultures prevail, with British initiative, cynicism and worldliness contrasted to American self-belief, rigidity and optimism. Rumsfeld dominated a Pentagon described by one insider as ‘a rat’s nest of military-industrial factions, factions within factions, and ever shifting alliances’. Rumsfeld and Cheney set the tone for institutional intimidation, distrust and coercion, encouraging institutional strategies of self-protection and individual initiative. In the end, the military undermined Rumsfeld’s authority by operating beyond his reach by opening-up inter-personal channels of informal communication and coordination.

A strained relationship

With its military, colonial and economic advantages eroded post-war Britain exerted relative power through the value placed by the US state on an intelligence apparatus honed through long experience of 'counter-terrorism'. Cooperation for intelligence and propaganda purposes was deepened during the Cold War, even when the two states appeared to have a conflict of interest, for example over Suez or nuclear weapons. After the Cold War it became more difficult to identify a distinct enemy against which the US/UK 'special relationship' could be cemented.

Briant reveals how the 'special relationship' could become a strained relationship. In a short chapter on Iraq, media planning in the theatre was bedevilled by Republican ideologues whose main narrative aimed to appease a US audience rather than attend to the violence faced by the long-suffering Iraqi people. British efforts to establish a post-invasion Iraqi media network was frustrated by rigid American control. Little understanding was shown by the propagandists of local cultures, an attitude mocked by one field operative: 'If you don't understand I'm gonna talk to you *louder* in English'. As Briant argues, psychological profiling was less about engaging with audiences than it was a more effective means to dominate and legitimate.

Political and military propaganda can serve conflicting agendas. While the UK military wanted to create an intensely threatening media campaign to unsettle the Iraqi regime before the invasion of 2003, Alastair Campbell, Blair's Director of Communications, felt compelled to tone down images of armed belligerence for political reasons, not least mass opposition in the UK to the war. As the MoD Director of Media Operations recalled, 'it was as though we went to war pretending we weren't'. Similarly, when the US military wanted to prepare the media to mislead the enemy in Fallujah they were wrongly led to report that the assault had already begun, forcing Washington to deny the story.

This is compounded by the fact that with cyberspace propaganda cannot be restricted to a domestic audience. Domestic media has been integrated into global media. For instance, a message in the UK about 'bringing our troops home' may be understood by Afghanistan media as a cut and run story of abandonment. Media effects are therefore a more pressing priority for state propaganda than assumptions about a clearly defined target audience. Surrogates are used by intelligence to covertly plant stories with a third party leaving the real source of the story hidden, and free to confirm or deny it as required on a non-attributable basis. As one interviewee described the symbiotic relationship between journalists and the military: 'they need us for access, we need them to tell our story'.

Excessive levels and systems of codification and classification also impeded UK-US propaganda planning coordination. On the other hand, as the Snowden leaks show, US intelligence benefits from looser legal restrictions on information gathering in the UK. British intelligence is not simply a subordinate arm of US policy but is also able to exert relative autonomy as the occasion demands, as when it distanced itself publicly from the CIA following public exposure of US torture in Iraq.

Propaganda targets

Loosely-affiliated terrorist networks present a more elusive and diffuse enemy for propaganda than the bi-polar state system of the Cold War. Rhetoric about a 'war on terror' supports an asymmetrical, open-ended and unlimited campaign compared to the binary logic of geo-political competition between Washington and Moscow. Yet it was other states – Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya - and their leaders – Taliban, Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi - that provided the initial opportunities for warfare. Indeed, the US pursuit of Saddam Hussein for propaganda purposes seemed to British informants a diversion from the very real threat of armed insurgency.

State-directed propaganda can no longer take as self-evident the traditional boundaries of territorially demarcated enemy states. However, this more 'flexible' and reactive environment did not decentralise the propaganda effort but actively recruited civil society organisations into the ambit of military necessity. Similarly, the hopes of digital utopians for a democratic and egalitarian cyberspace have been dashed by covert propaganda operations that constantly call into question the reliability and authenticity of information.

Yet media planning relies on a shared belief in the integrity and veracity of public agencies. When it came to the notorious 'dodgy dossier' that was compiled to justify the invasion of Iraq media planners placed their trust in 'the system to get it right'. It seemed inconceivable to insiders that in all conscience 'the intelligence community' might be wrong or misguided about the situation in pre-war Iraq.

A large hierarchical system imposes a perceptual consensus that disciplines the apparatus and prevents ideological dissensus. Hence the CIA 'cherry picked' politically popular ideas about Iraq for the propaganda war no matter how wide of the mark the information was, leading to Colin Powell's public but false claims about Iraq's chemical weapons at the UN in 2003. Propaganda faces a tougher environment when political leaders like Bush and Blair are seen as dissemblers that can no longer be trusted to tell the truth to the public they represent. It also makes it harder to accept the paternalist apology that elite propaganda is necessary to preserve democracy. Publics continue to be distrusted by politicians and intelligence bodies as ignorant and unstable subjects whose interests need to be managed by elites for their own good.

As a specific type of knowledge reproduction propaganda is rightly assigned as 'a very specific kind of communication'. Briant initially defined it as deliberate manipulation to produce a desired effect in the audience, a definition so broad that it would appear to encompass the production of all media texts. What is implicit here and specific to propaganda is a conscious attempt to conceal the relations of ruling. An entire apparatus is needed to produce desired effects across a wide population all the while concealing the motives of state and the leakiness of its own operation.

Refugees and the media

Successful propaganda eliminates, controls or marginalises competing perspectives and sources of information. The result is a monological media environment that serves powerful interests. This has been an abiding concern of the pioneering Glasgow Media Group over the past forty years. As the Glasgow Media Group, Emma Briant, Greg Philo and Pauline Donald examine in *Bad News for Refugees* recent media coverage of asylum and migration in the UK. Media coverage has been overwhelmingly monological, uniformly couched in negative discourses of deviancy, danger and disloyalty.

Bad News show how certain underlying themes that conflate asylum-seekers with ‘economic’ migrants recursively structure news stories. In so doing the Glasgow Media Group adopt a richly-layered multi-method approach, deploying qualitative and quantitative textual analysis of press and television samples, audience research, and interviews with journalists, refugees and professionals. Negative themes about the asylum ‘threat’ became so embedded in the collective memory that focus groups were able to reproduce news headlines from 2006 almost exactly word for word years later.

Over the past two decades political rhetoric in the UK about asylum has coarsened as asylum policies become more and more draconian. Repeated references are made in the British press to ‘illegal asylum-seekers’ or ‘illegal immigrants’ even though no such legal categories exist. Following the catastrophic displacement of tens of millions of people in the aftermath of world war in 1951 the UN introduced basic protection for groups fleeing persecution. Under this provision ‘refugees’ are afforded greater protection than ‘asylum seekers’, people who have not yet firmly established the grounds for their persecution. This is compounded for other people who have no legal protection, above all those fleeing natural and human-made disasters, with few if any survival resources at their disposal, their precarious existence exacerbated by gross global economic and political power imbalances.

This process of asylum demonisation coincided with a defensive and reactive New Labour government that shared an ideological consensus about ‘abuse’ of the welfare system by unscrupulous and undeserving asylum applicants, accompanied by heightened discourses of criminality and terrorism. It reached a farcical level with the *Sun*’s notorious front page headline of July 2003 that blared: ‘Callous asylum seekers are barbecuing the Queen’s swans’. Politicians outbid each other to criminalise asylum seekers in an arbitrary race to raise the absolute numbers of expelled refugees and reduce the absolute number of applicants. Such discourses rarely rate a mention of the obvious fact that a large proportion of displaced refugees are created by war, including British and US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Inaccurate media coverage about asylum is not the result of a few misinformed ideologues but, as *Bad News* amply demonstrates, is reproduced systematically in a way that glides effortlessly over any moral, factual and logical inconsistencies. Media, government, the police and immigration officials appear to have a mutual interest of colluding in stoking popular fear of migrants. Journalists find themselves under professional pressure to adapt stories to the preferred editorial narrative of dissolute and dangerous outsiders. Careers are on

the line. One journalist revealed in a research interview that as a young reporter they were sent by a more powerful editor to ‘monster an asylum seeker’. This book is an accessible account of the process by which ‘monsters’ are invented and reproduced, and the nefarious consequences.

Far from being an invasive threat to a tranquil UK, the ‘bogus’ asylum discourse has had real effects on the physical and mental well-being of refugees in the form of assaults, destitution, detention, and death. Interviewed refugees report that they feel vulnerable and stigmatised by news stories about criminal migrants that label them under a reviled category of human being. Distorted media representations fuel the informal circuits of blame gossip. As the *Bad News* team conclude, by constructing and legitimising public resentment media constructions of ‘asylum seekers may join a long list of convenient scapegoats including the unemployed, those claiming benefits and those registered as disabled’. Like other disdained groups, migrants also lack a presence in the media landscape as authors of their own narratives of displacement.

Such misrepresentations are not merely false but inflammatory towards a desperately vulnerable group. To redress this imbalance less partial and more accurate reporting is necessary. This needs to be part of a wider politics of representation that addresses the shifting power balances between groups in society. Both *Bad News* and Briant’s searching study of propaganda help expose the processes and sources of misinformation in a turbulent world to the much needed interrogation of the democratic gaze.

¹ Under review: G. Philo, E. Briant and P. Donald, *Bad News for Refugees*, Pluto Press, 2013; E.L. Briant, *Propaganda and Counter-Terrorism: Strategies for Global Change*, Manchester University Press, 2015.