

INTERNET AND DIGITAL PROPAGANDA: SOCIAL MEDIA

Darko Tadić

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Information Technologies, Apeiron University, Banja Luka, dtadic44@gmail.com

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Abstract: The development of modern digital communications, the Internet and the World Information Network at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century brought enormous development and progress in propaganda communications in all spheres of human society. Propaganda in digital media has been studied since the early days of the Internet and various digital platforms, which led to the emergence of completely new media specific to this area of communication, and a completely new way of producing and disseminating various types of propaganda content. Based on a discussion of key concepts and terminology, this review paper describes how new ways of deception and source obfuscation are emerging and spreading in digital and social media environments, and how these developments complicate the understanding and impact of propaganda on modern human life. The paper concludes with the assertion that the modern challenges of detecting and countering covert propaganda can only be solved if all actors of social life in the public sphere of social media are considered responsible and provide the necessary support for checking published information.

Keywords: covert propaganda, disinformation, deception, fake news, manipulation, social media

INTRODUCTION

Propaganda as a phenomenon in human history, and above all in the history of communication, has always captured the imagination of people. Like some secret weapon or miracle agent, which gives its owners incredible power to manipulate people, propaganda has gone through various phases of decline and rise throughout history. Although, like any other way or principle of communication, its character depended on the one who uses it, this specific form of human communication had a negative sign from the very beginning. Skill in the use of language, symbols and other means of communication was understood as a special power that was too often abused in history by individuals or elite sections of social communities. Even a superficial look at these historical processes reveals to us how much importance was attached to propaganda as a means of managing or achieving certain goals. From the Egyptian Pharaohs, through the Mayan culture, the medieval Catholic Church, all the way to the Nazi Third Reich and contemporary enlightened Western democratic societies, propaganda appears as a powerful ally and a valuable tool in gain-

ing followers or entronement of signs and messages about the power and greatness of smaller and larger rulers, dictators or special interest groups [1].

Although the roots and etymology of propaganda predate electronic communication by several centuries, scientific engagement on this topic has historically been inseparable from the rise of mass media technologies in the 20th century. Consequently, the field of propaganda traditionally defines propaganda as an intimate connection with media channels such as radio, television, film and newspapers. In his book "Public Opinion", [2] Walter Lippmann referred to the "production of consent" as "capable of great refinements", a process that can be understood and opened to every human being. Noam Chomsky in his influential work "Propaganda and Public Opinion" defines propaganda as a phenomenon that "requires the cooperation of the mass media" [3]. Similarly, El-lul argued that propaganda "cannot exist without using these mass media" [4]. Propaganda, manifested in the 20th century, is perceived as a distinctly modern phenomenon woven through mass communication channels. From this perspective, propaganda encompasses mass-mediated manipulation organized on a

large scale to persuade the public. The goal of such persuasion is typically “closely aligned with elite interests” [5].

However, as Farkas and Neumayer state, not all researchers attribute propaganda exclusively to elite groups [6]. This is central to the topic of this paper, since the decentralized way of producing the content of modern digital media within the global digital information network and modern computer technologies challenges the perception that propaganda originates only from centralized sources. As a conceptual vocabulary for distinguishing between hierarchical and non-hierarchical propaganda, Ellul proposes the concepts of vertical and horizontal propaganda [7]. As part of a rigorous typology, he proposes this concept to distinguish between propaganda by social elites and that produced by small groups of citizens and interested individuals. Accordingly, not all propaganda is associated with political, military, or commercial organizations, although it is by far the most widespread. According to Ellul, vertical propaganda is characterized by its emanation from elites who rely on the mass media to persuade audiences into submission and action. One-to-many communication channels are vital in this regard, as they are means of mass mobilization of a crowd to do the bidding of a source (eg a government, a party leader, a general or a company). Vertical propaganda is particularly effective in agitation propaganda, which is designed to mobilize the crowd against the depicted enemy, “the source of all misery” [8]. Hitler’s campaigns against the Jews and Lenin’s campaigns against the Kulaks are examples of such propaganda. In practice, argues Ellul, agitation campaigns always originate from social elites. Nevertheless, agitational propaganda can be effective in getting the audience to take ownership of the constructed narrative, reinforcing and expanding it. If successful, agitational propaganda therefore does not necessarily rely on the continuous orchestration of the mass media, as “every person caught up in it” can in turn become their own “propagandist” [9].

Contrary to vertical and agitational propaganda, horizontal and integrative propaganda aims at stabilizing the social body, its unification, and strengthening. These forms of propaganda can originate both from social elites, such as governments seeking to stabilize societies during political crises, and from

citizens. Horizontal propaganda relies on small, autonomous groups and individuals cooperating based on a common ideology. It differs in that it originates from within the population and not from the top. This form of propaganda is a rare phenomenon, non-existent before the 20th century. The decentralized propaganda of Mao’s China is highlighted as an example. Unlike vertical propaganda, which “requires a vast apparatus of mass media communication”, horizontal propaganda relies only on “a vast organization of people” [10]. Media control, in other words, is inseparable from vertical propaganda, but not similarly fundamental to horizontal propaganda.

DIGITAL MEDIA AND PROPAGANDA

At the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, with the development of the Internet and digital communications, propaganda got a completely new technical means of expression, which led to the further development of propaganda communication to unprecedented proportions, unknown to humanity until then. The democratization of communications brought about by the Internet now provides an opportunity for every participant in the communication process to produce and disseminate propaganda information. In the earlier period, propaganda was usually implemented by some kind of institution, large print and electronic media, and interested state and private organizations that were the owners of large and main communication channels. Today, through numerous Internet sites owned by individuals or small private groups, as well as the great development of social networks, it has enabled every individual to actively participate in the propaganda communication process. Digital media platforms in the form of individual blogs, websites and social networks, as well as the appearance of entire armies of bots in various forms, have enabled the spread of numerous misinformation and half-truths in an unprecedented scope and scope. Although at first glance the democratization of Internet communications seems like a place for the free dissemination of accurate and verified information, the reality shows something quite different. The Internet will continue to primarily serve elite and corporate interests. Consequently, the Internet functions more as a means of control for those already in power than as an instrument of mass communication for those who lack brand names, pre-

existing audiences and/or large resources. For this reason, it is necessary to build conceptualizations and terminology in the study of this social phenomenon in order to understand the consequences of covert propaganda in digital and social media.

The development of digital media technologies complicates the fundamental notion that covert propaganda de facto originates from large organizations through one-to-many communication channels. With the decentralized way of producing and distributing digital media content, the number of potential sources has increased dramatically. This complicates existing analytical frameworks for identifying and analyzing sources of covert propaganda. Nevertheless, the prominence of digital media should not be seen as "the end of a great propaganda orchestration" [11].

PROPAGANDA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

The emergence of the Internet, that is, social networks as a special form of communication between individuals and social groups, represents a special form of dissemination and exchange of information that had no counterpart in the previous individual and mass communication. Large media conglomerates and media companies quickly adapted to the newly emerging situation, although at first glance it seemed that their influence and importance would decline in the new communication age. The difference between the previous classic division into horizontal and vertical propaganda has become quite blurred and unclear, bearing in mind that the division between individuals, media groups, in the spread of propaganda influences is at first glance significantly reduced in the new online space. In fact, the exact opposite happened: political, economic, military and other organizations managed to significantly exploit the development of these modern digital communication technologies, by introducing strict control, censorship and propaganda influence in these new media.

With the emergence of strictly controlled communication channels such as Internet browsers and social networks under the control and ownership of a small number of digital companies, content and information control over social networks was achieved, which created the conditions for further successful dissemination of hidden propaganda content and influence on mass communication. In the last decade,

the number of users of social networks has recorded an exponential growth, so for example one of the most popular social networks (Facebook) reached the number of three billion users in 2024. Human communication and exchange of information and other content - in the field of political events, economy, entertainment or everyday life - has become dominant in this media environment. This development of events has enabled propagandists new modalities and forms of horizontal and vertical propaganda, which is now additionally strengthened by users of social networks through the possibility to place comments, likes, retweets and freely share content.

This is how propaganda successfully changed its form: from the classic relationship of "one for all", it became a modern propaganda communication "all for all". In this way, with the permeation of new digital technologies, propaganda has become a form of communication of influence that combines digital technology and social relations into a new form of digital architecture. In this completely new context, the engagement of the average user on social networks, i.e. the "ordinary man", has become a central issue and the main feature of communication and the building of social relations, which requires a completely new approach to teaching propaganda influence in the modern digital society of the XXI century. First of all, concerning content producers, users, distributors of information and new platforms for exchanging content.

Social networks, as a new form of propaganda communication, introduced two key innovations important for propaganda action in the modern age: a two-way form of engaged communication and a reduction in content production costs. Creating websites and blogs, buying domains, and maintaining them has become available at a very low and affordable price. Internet access also becomes symbolic in a financial sense. Social networks are generally free for users, and available to everyone on mobile phones, personal computers, smart watches. This situation opens completely new opportunities for action by individuals and small social groups that have the ambition to achieve a certain social influence and market content of various kinds (personal popularity, economic and political influence, social movements, etc.). Guaranteed anonymity of content creators has become acceptable, without the need for additional

verification of information. Social networks characterized by personal profiles of users, who have the opportunity to create personal social networks of different sizes, interests and content, have become an extremely convenient place for various forms of false or covert propaganda. Credibility and trustworthiness of hidden or fake user profiles enable the implementation of propaganda influence through user posts and comments that give them false credibility. Users who “like”, comment, share content, and become “friends” of such profiles or pages contribute to the further spread and confirmation of the posted content. On the other hand, the situation is further complicated because large companies such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or TikTok are often unable to identify, check, and manage problematic content due to the large number of users.

As a solution, these companies are forced to create and enforce various restrictions and rules that they impose on users, often with the help of commercial content administrators, but only at the request of users who report inappropriate content that drastically violates the rules regarding content posted by individual users or groups. The problem is that this type of action in preventing propaganda is not effective enough due to the small number of staff and the huge amount of content and users who operate on a social network. So the prevention of the spread of propagandistic content and its influence remains mainly on the users of these networks.

In such a situation, the key question is what can be done to prevent the harmful propaganda activities of various entities on social networks. Is the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in this domain adequate and possible? So far, things are not looking great, although the possibility remains that in the near future, improved AI will be of great use. The spread of hate speech, deception, and false information in the form of entertainment and unverified information, at this moment, depends on human judgment and decision, because algorithms are not yet able to analyze and evaluate the cultural and social context of each post or user comment. Accordingly, one of the solutions to this situation can be the formation of citizen groups that would actively fight against propaganda by reporting fake pages and profiles on these networks to the companies that own social media.

The challenges are numerous and great: the num-

ber of users and content, new forms of digital technologies and tools in content creation (text, video, images), represent a great difficulty and challenge in assessing whether manipulation is involved. Things are further complicated by the large decentralization of the social media structure, which makes it significantly more difficult to find and identify propaganda content and its dissemination to the public. However, the biggest challenge is the current business and social policy and the attitude of large companies that own social media, because they provide insufficiently effective support and limited opportunities for their users to react in the right way. Such an insufficiently active attitude only promotes the uncontrolled spread of propaganda on social networks and represents a key challenge in preventing the ongoing action that requires decisive measures and actions of all interested parties.

DISCUSSION AND PERSPECTIVES

The main tool in the spread of modern propaganda, in the form of disinformation, fake news, various types of fabricated events and “testimonies” of groups and individuals on their networks, have become the leading social networks, primarily “X” (Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, but also platforms for private communication such as Viber, Whats Up and similar. Unlike the mainstream media, which can cause the consumer of information to be wary or hesitate in accepting and interpreting the content, these social networks rely on the spread of rumors, innovations, recommendations and similar methods that give false credibility to the published content, often in the form of fun, oddity, novelty. In this way, the official guard towards the source of information in the classic form is bypassed (political entities, large media, government bodies, organizations), and the spread of misinformation takes place horizontally on a friendly basis in the form of proposals, recommendations of interesting things, etc. Social networks are today, and with the prospect that they will be increasingly so in the future, becoming the main carriers of propaganda content in the form of fake news and other forms of disinformation and misinformation, further obscuring the influence of propaganda in modern societies.

Even a cursory review and comparative analysis of the content on these networks reveals a completely new dimension of online propaganda. This is espe-

cially visible on specialized platforms for publishing short private messages, such as platform "X" or its counterpart Telegram, where the content of individuals and informal civil groups on topics from political, social and economic events dominates. There, in the form of unverified and attractive information, various mainly negative contents related to the actions of persons or organizations that influence social life are placed, which can strongly influence the public's perception of these events and direct the actions and activities of individuals or social groups in accordance with the propaganda agenda of the creators of these contents. These networks are thus often misused by the main actors of these events, following their interests and exerting a significant influence on public opinion in the modern online world. According to Guess and Lyons, "there is growing concern that misinformation spread via the rapid introduction of social media in developing countries, especially via mobile devices, is causing increasing social divisions and even violence". [12]

So, what is the perspective of propaganda in the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and similar tools that already work on social networks? Bearing in mind the previous experience of the relationship between propaganda and technology, it is realistic to expect that the trend of spreading disinformation as the main form of propaganda action will spread at an ever faster pace, primarily horizontally, and that social networks will become the main carriers of this action. The focus of action is being shifted to the line of all participants in the creation of content, while the influence of the main mainstream media will gradually weaken and have a peripheral or corrective role in the production and consumption of information in the public sphere. The difference between producers and consumers of content will increasingly disappear, where propaganda will appear in both roles equally: we will all be both propagandists and consumers.

CONCLUSION

Modern propaganda has changed quite a bit since its beginnings in the 19th century: from mass printing for "one dinar", through radio, television, and satellite communications in the 20th century, to the digital age in which we live today. Although it has undergone major technological changes, its essence has remained unchanged. Manipulation of information and

influence on human behavior have only increased by the challenges of modern times. However, the emergence of the Internet and digital technologies has led to one key change: the boundaries between creators and consumers of propaganda messages have been erased, and now we are all creators and consumers of propaganda content. Also, digital propaganda and new Internet technologies call into question the classic division between vertical and horizontal propaganda, creating a new, unique online space in which the boundaries between reality and virtual reality are erased, which gives propaganda action a completely new dimension that should be taken into account.

Social networks have become a real example of this new age and a challenge for new watchmen who will now have to redefine understandings about the nature, essence and methods of operation of modern propaganda. Propaganda research must be expanded with new tools, concepts and challenges that the digital technological revolution and social reality pose to modern man. It remains to be seen whether propaganda and its techniques of communication and creating relationships between people will become our new reality. What remains as a clear fact and proof is that propaganda action in all areas of human life will continue to be an important phenomenon against which modern society must find appropriate solutions. Otherwise, propaganda and deception can very easily become our only reality in which there will no longer be a difference between real and fictional life.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Prof. Dr. Darko Tadić is a playwright and professor of creative writing. He works as an assistant professor at the Faculty of Information Technologies of Apeiron University in Banja Luka on the subject Creative Writing and as a professor at the ICEPS Vocational School in Belgrade, on the subject Advertising and PR. Doctorate at FDU in Belgrade on "Propaganda film and media". Worked in the advertising industry for 20 years and created advertising and propaganda campaigns of various kinds. Attended education in the field of psychodrama. He now teaches students and others who want to gain knowledge and enjoy the exchange of ideas on the topic of creative writing, as well as writing as a communication art in achieving spiritual, professional, and personal growth and development. He is the founder of the online workshop for Creative Writing and Writing Therapy. He is the author of several books and manuals in these fields.

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