**Propaganda, Politics and Deception**[i]

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*Abstract*

*For many scholars the issues of propaganda and deception have been largely taboo subjects. There is only fleeting attention to deception from political scientists whilst communication scholars pay minimal attention to the issue of propaganda. And yet we live in an age in which debates about deception and propaganda are prevalent. Recent angst over fake news and foreign propaganda activities have become part of political discourse. In fact, as this chapter shows, questions of deception and lying in politics are perennial and date back to ancient times whilst propaganda remains an integral component of contemporary democracies. Moreover, deception as a political strategy has become pervasive in contemporary liberal democracies because of the range of institutions now involved in the manipulation of information. These institutions include media, academia, think tanks and intelligence services. Furthermore, the emergence of internet-based digital communication creates new opportunities for powerful actors to manipulate beliefs and conduct. These developments raise profound questions with respect to the health of contemporary liberal democracies and, accordingly, the study of propaganda and deception needs to become far more central and mainstream than has been the case to date.*

**Keywords**

Propaganda, deception, organised persuasive communication, public relations, strategic communication, democracy

## Overview

Popular current debates surrounding 'fake news' and propaganda have elevated the perceived importance of the role of deception in politics. Much of the mainstream discussion of these matters has tended to focus on the controversial US president Donald Trump, the prevalence of 'fake news' across social and alternative/independent media, and a renewed fixation on the alleged Russian threat to Western interests and its mischievous employment of propaganda as a part of hybrid warfare. Trump has frequently charged mainstream US media with disseminating 'fake news' whilst there is now extensive angst over the circulation of both fake news and propaganda across social media. Russia has been frequently accused of employing both cyber warfare and state-backed media outlets such as *RT* and *Sputnik* in order to influence elections across the West, in part by spreading disinformation.

However, what we now frequently refer to as 'fake news', and its deployment as part of a political strategy, are nothing new to Western democracies. As shall be discussed in this chapter, deception as a political strategy has a long lineage, dating back to Aristotle, and has been frequently employed across Western democracies. At the same time, although we frequently associate propaganda with external hostile states, e.g. Russia, and, in doing so, disassociate it from Western liberal democracies, we do in fact live in societies in which manipulated information is ubiquitous. This chapter maps the role of both deception and propaganda in liberal democracies. The first section charts the history of deception as a political strategy, detailing in particular the rationale and ethics behind its use. The second section introduces the concept of contemporary propaganda and explains how manipulated information, frequently involving deception, has become integral to the exercise of power within Western democracies. The final section addresses key issues now emerging with respect to propaganda and deception in the contemporary media environment, characterised by Internet-based communication and the increasing employment of artificial intelligence technology designed to 'persuade' and 'influence' the beliefs and conduct of democratic citizenry. The nefarious and deleterious consequences of these dynamics will be highlighted.

## 1. The Long History of Deception in Politics: from Plato's Nobel Lie to Neo-Conservative ideology and Marx's false consciousness

As John Mearsheimer noted in *Why Leaders Lie*, lying and deception receive scant attention from scholars of political science and international relations. This might be because of ideological bias whereby predominantly liberal scholars simply do not perceive that cherished democratic systems might be seriously compromised by deception and lies. Or it might be because the intellectually lazy, but extremely effective, label 'conspiracy theorist', is so frequently levelled at anyone who explores covert activity amongst politically powerful actors (Dentith, 2018). It might be because academics feel ill-equipped in terms of methods and research tools to penetrate sufficiently the power networks that lie behind organised 'disinformation' campaigns (Miller et al forthcoming). At an epistemological level, it is highly likely that the postmodern turn, which refutes the ability to distinguish true from false, has made the question of deception a moot point. Most simply, perhaps, the difficulty of distinguishing between intentional deception, misperception and ideological frameworks causes academics to shy away from a concerted effort to analyse and pinpoint political deception (Corner 2007).

This lacuna is odd given the long history of deception in politics. In ancient Athens, Plato's concept of the 'noble lie' (360 BC: Book 3: 414b-415d), relaying the thinking of Socrates, referred to the importance of deceptive myths that were essential to maintaining order in society: the idea here was that to ensure harmony in the context of a social hierarchy, myths needed to be created in order to help people accept their location within that hierarchy: God made some to rule (the golden race), others to build (iron and bronze workers) and still others to fight (soldiers). Aristotle's *On*

*Rhetoric* (2013 [230 BC]) attempted to distinguish between sophistry and rhetoric with a noble purpose although, according to Corner (2007: 672), his own arts of persuasion seem at times close to the advocacy of deception. Generally, Athenian thinkers such as such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Thucydides and Plato distinguished 'persuasion brought about by deceit (dolos), false logic, coercion, and other forms of chicanery from persuasion (peitho)' (Lebow 2008: 28) achieved through sincere dialogue. Perhaps more than other individual thinker, 16th century Niccolo Machiavelli has come to epitomise the doctrine of deception as a necessary political tactic. *The Prince* sets a rationale for the importance of deception as a political strategy. Machiavelli advised that, because men are bad, 'and will not keep faith with you, you too are not bound to observe it with them'. Importantly, the 'Prince' (the person who governs) must and can: 'be a great pretender and dissembler; and men are simple, and so subject to present necessities, that he who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived (2003 [1532]: Ch. 18).' Broadly speaking, Machiavelli understood deception as one amongst many tactics, others including coercion, that are necessary in order to secure protect the state.

Ideas that deception might be a political strategy necessary, whether to protect state interests or as part of an elitest ideological mindset, have persisted in to the contemporary era. For example, the work of Leo Strauss represents a contemporary incarnation of Plato's 'noble lie' and has been associated with neo-conservative thinking (Strauss 1975; see also Strauss 1958). Here, Plato's noble lie can be clearly seen in the idea that democratic politics is too idealistic and that the greater good can only be achieved by deferring to wise and enlightened elites. Strauss's concern is that, at times, the truth would threaten political stability and, consequently, deception becomes essential to political order and stability. The elitist and indeed anti-democratic sensibility of this perspective can be seen in the following quote from the neoconservative writer Irving Kristol:

> There are truths appropriate for children; truths that are appropriate for students; truths that are appropriate for educated adults; and truths that are appropriate for highly educated adults, and the notion that there should be one set of truths for everyone is a fallacy of modern day democracy, it simply does not work. (Kristol cited in Oborne 2014)

A less ideological, and more practical reification of the importance of deception can be seen in the work of John Mearsheimer (2011). Informed by the realist theoretical perspective on international politics, which emphasises the inherent dangers of an anarchic international system and the importance of states to protect their own security above all else, Mearsheimer sees deception as simply a necessary part of protecting state security. Interestingly, and counter-intuitively, he argues that inter-state deception through lying is comparatively rare and that, more frequently, leaders deceive their own publics in order to defend what they perceive to be the national interest. So, for example, leaders might engage in fearmongering when they 'see a threat emerging but think that they cannot make the public see the wolf at the door without resorting to a deception campaign' (Mearsheimer 2011: 45). One example of this form of deception is Franklin Delano Roosevelt's lies to the American public to try to get the US involved in WWII (Dallek 1979). Mearsheimer also discusses how lies might be used to cover up strategic failures (Mearsheimer 2011: 67). Most controversially, at least from the perspective of liberal democracies, Mearsheimer (2011: ch.7) argues that leaders will engage in deception when foreign policies fall short of liberal claims to be law-abiding actors who uphold high moral standards within the international system. Harking back to Plato's 'Noble Lie', he also notes how nationalist myths, designed to foster social cohesion and support for the state, frequently involve lies and half-truths (Mearsheimer 2011: 75).

Of course, others are far more reluctant to accept or tolerate deception and lying as a political strategy (Bok, 1999; Cliffe, Ramsay and Bartlett 2000; Ramsay 2000). From a democratic perspective, deception is clearly deeply problematic. If publics are deceived by politicians and other powerful actors, it is very difficult to conceive how meaningful

democratic debate can occur. As Bakir et al (2018) argue, free and informed consent cannot be obtained under conditions in which information has been so manipulated that people do not possess sufficient information with which to rationally evaluate an issue. Deception, quite clearly, violates basic requirements of a democratic public sphere (Habermas, 1984). For those who emphasise the importance of democracy, although few of whom would rule out lying under all circumstances, it is essential that clear limits should be placed with respect to deception as a political strategy. Ramsay (2000a) emphasizes the corrosive impact of deception upon rational and effective policy making:

> Because information is only available to a small number of people, this limits debate and hinders communication between those who need to know the facts in order to ensure that sound decisions are made. It also narrows the range of perspectives and opinions brought to bear on solving problems, restricts consideration of all the implications of a course of action and prevents criticism and dissenting views from being heard.

Similarly, Bok (1999: 143) highlights how deception corrupts political processes creating 'dangers of bias, self-harm, proliferation, and severe injuries to trust'. Indeed, it is the idea of an elite cut-off from reality due to deceptive and self-deceptive groups of insulated 'professional problem solvers' that formed one aspect of Hannah Arendt's seminal (1973: 9) commentary on *The Pentagon Papers*. These official documents, commissioned by US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara and leaked to the *New York Times* in 1971, revealed the disjuncture between the pessimistic intelligence assessments regarding the Vietnam War and official claims regarding both the course of the war and the reasons for US involvement (Sheehan 1971; Ellsberg 2003). For Arendt (1973: 12), whilst the raw intelligence reports were accurate, the professional problem solvers sought to erase inconvenient facts to such an extent that their assessment became detached from reality. Arendt (1973: 8) concludes that, because a US President is so reliant upon advisors as a source of information as to what is going on, he or she may become the most vulnerable to 'complete manipulation'.

Of course, beyond the question of rational and informed decision-making and harms to the body politic lies the concern that deception can become powerful tool with which to exercise political power and engenders corruption and abuse. From a Marxian 'false consciousness' perspective, ideology (Althusser, 1969), or its looser variant hegemony (Gramsci; Hall, 1977), can be seen as, at least in part, as deceptive and a necessary, or at least persistent, part of ensuring that those in subservient political and economic positions either believe that their position in society is justified and appropriate, or at the very least acquiesce (Miller, 2002). Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model of the media presents a contemporary application of these ideas. Noting the close proximity of corporate media to political power, its profit orientation and propensity to relay official positions on specific policies as well as wider societal ideological frameworks, they show how mainstream US media present a profoundly distorted view of the world. As a result, crimes committed by official enemies are highlighted or even invented whilst those of allies, or 'client states' as Herman and Chomsky (1988) call them, are ignored or downplayed. Most importantly, nefarious and immoral actions by the US government are systematically disguised by the corporate media. The net result is that varying proportions of US publics are led to perceive their own government as inherently law abiding, benign and committed to high moral standards when the reality is very different. Herman and Chomsky (1988) document the US track record of supporting brutal regimes whilst deterring democracy in other states, and prosecuting aggressive wars that are illegal under international law.

## 2. Propaganda and 'Public Relations'

So far we have discussed three broad strands of thinking with respect to the matter of deception, from those who see it as a necessary political strategy whether for ideological or

practical reasons, those see it as having deleterious consequences for democracy, and Marxian perspectives for which deception is one important element with respect to how structures of inequality and exploitation are maintained. Questions with respect to how propaganda and deception are actually realized in practice are, however, poorly understood by the aforementioned literatures. Deception is taken as a given whilst the organizations, institutions, doctrines and practices that help to make deception a reality are effectively black boxed. It is here that two extant literatures, one on public relations (and related fields) and one on propaganda, provide at least a starting point for helping to understand deception as a political practice.

*From Propaganda to Public Relations*

Organized persuasive communication (OPC) (Bakir et al 2018) refers to intentional actions aimed at shaping both beliefs and conduct in order achieve specific political outcomes. Historically, these activities have been labeled as propaganda and, in the first part of the 20th century, leading thinkers such as political scientist Harold Lasswell (1927, 1935, 1951) and journalist Walter Lippman (1922, 1925, 1955) described the need for publics to be managed and manipulated in liberal democratic states. As Edward Bernays famously described:

> The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.

The term 'propaganda', however, came to be understood widely as a process of manipulation and one that frequently involved deception and new terms were invented. As Bernays explained, 'propaganda got to be a bad word because of the Germans ... using it [during WW1]. So what I did was to ... find some other words. So we found the words Council on Public Relations'[ii]. Since the birth of public relations, or PR, a large variety of terms have come to be used to explain OPC activities including *political marketing*, *promotional culture*, *public diplomacy*, *strategic communication*, *perception management*, *political* communication, *public affairs, information operations*, *influence operations, political warfare* and *advertising.* Although not necessarily always involving either manipulation or deception, these activities frequently do and Philip Taylor has argued that they rightly be understood as euphemistic distractions:

> Let us first dispel with the euphemistic nonsense that surrounds this topic and which does in fact obscure what we are actually talking about – namely propaganda. … an entire euphemism industry has developed to deflect attention away from the realities of what they do, ranging from 'spin doctoring' and 'public affairs' at the political level to 'international information' and 'perception management' at the military level. … despite the euphemism game, democracies have grown ever more sophisticated at conducting propaganda, however labelled, which only they deny to be propaganda in the first place. (Taylor 2002: 20)

Whatever one's preferred term, these organized approaches to persuasion and influence play major roles in the exercise of power across political and economic realms. The scale of activities is huge: Between 1979 and 1998 the PR consultancy industry in the UK mushroomed by a factor of 31 (11-fold increase in real terms) and this sector has 'acted largely for business interests' (Miller and Dinan 2000: 10-14, 29). UK and US governments spend large sums on promotional activities. For example, according to a 2002 report by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, it spent £340 million annually on public diplomacy operations in London (Miller, 2004: 80). The US federal government spent $16 billion on outside advertising and PR contractors between 2002 and 2012.[iii]

Understanding the scale of the 'organized persuasive communication' activity provides us, then, with a starting point for starting to understand quite how extensive deceptive and

propagandistic communication actually is in contemporary democracies. Put another way, we can start to comprehend the scale of deception that might be taking place and, critically, unpack the black boxing of these processes, which we see across the literature (discussed in section one of this chapter). Before proceeding to discuss some of the institutional and strategic details *vis-à-vis* deception and propaganda, it is important to introduce a caveat. Organized persuasive communication should not be understood as necessarily deceptive or manipulative. As Bakir et al (2018) explain, it is possible to conceive of OPC that meets, at least in ideal terms, Habermasian notions of rational persuasion. This is why the term 'propaganda' can and should be preserved for forms of communication that are manipulative and avoided as a blanket terms covering all OPC activities. Persuasion that avoids deception, incentivization and coercion can be seen as relatively consensual and democratic (Bakir et al 2018). And it may well be the case that a proportion of OPC activities fall into this category. However, as Bakir et al (2018) document, much of the literature on PR (and related fields such as strategic communication and public diplomacy) rarely if ever engages with manipulative forms of persuasion involving deception, coercion and incentivization whilst the existing literature on propaganda has a poorly developed conceptualization of deception. Attention to coercion and incentivization is important here: frequently neglected across both propaganda and PR literatures, these aspects of manipulative OPC highlight how persuasion frequently operates 'in relation to physical, socio-political and economic contexts where incentives and threats are part of persuasive communication activities (Bakir et al 2018). To a very large extent, propaganda, understood as manipulative OPC is something that is argued to go on in other (i.e. non-democratic states) or is relegated to history and wartime (e.g. WWII, WW1 and the Cold War). Because of this intellectual tunnel vision, it is at least likely that deception plays a far greater role in contemporary liberal democratic politics than is commonly understood. And it is to a discussion of such activities and the institutions and doctrines that underpin them that we now turn.

*Forms of Deception*

Deception, as a strategy, can undertake a number of forms. Lying, although most frequently associated with notions of propaganda, is actually comparatively rare. The political costs of being found out in a lie are frequently fatal in political terms and, as the German proverb states, 'lies have short legs' (Friedrich 1943: 78-79; see also Ellul 1965: 53-57) meaning that they are vulnerable to being readily revealed. This said, lying as a political strategy does occur. For example, documented instances of lying include the Iran-Contra and Watergate scandals. With respect to the former, US officials lied with respect to their knowledge of a covert operation which involved the supply of weaponry to Iran which was, in turn, used to funnel money to the Contras in Nicaragua who were seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government (Wroe 1992). With the famous Watergate case, Nixon's claims that he was unaware of the coverup of the burglary of Democratic National Congress offices were revealed as lies when taped conversations came to light (Sheehan 1971). A more recent case involves the now infamous claims made by US officials in the run-up to the Iraq invasion in 2003. Here Mearsheimer (2011) argues that US officials knowingly lied when they claimed that they knew for certain, based upon intelligence, that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

More frequently, deception can occur through manipulation of information involving distortion, omission (Herring and Robinson 2014) and misdirection (Bakir, 2013). Distortion involves manipulating information in order to exaggerate or downplay particular facts. For example, Herring and Robinson (2014) document the ways in which the UK government manipulated information through both exaggeration and omission in order to create the impression of there existing a current and serious WMD threat from Iraq. This was achieved, for example, by producing an intelligence-based dossier on Iraqi WMD that *omitted* countries understood to possess more advanced WMD programmes from the dossier (North Korea, Iran, Syria and Libya) in order to help obscure the fact that Iraq was not a particularly serious or current problem (Herring and Robinson 2014). *Distortion* of information occurred when it was decided to use a piece of raw intelligence,

from a 'source on trial', which was sub-sourced to a claim from another individual who had only promised hard evidence at a future date, in order to strengthen the entire dossier in a way that suggested it was known that Iraq was actively producing chemical and biological weapons (Herring and Robinson 2014).

The Iraq case is also an example of *coercive deception* (Bakir et al 2018) whereby deception is used in order to persuade audiences by deceiving them into experiencing psychological pressure or fear of physical harm, is that of threat exaggeration. Mearsheimer (2011), in *Why Leaders Lie*, notes the frequency with which state politicians employ the tactic of scare mongering in order to mobilize populations in support of particular foreign policy objectives. The pattern of deception through distortion and omission was also reflected in the US and manifested itself notably in sound bites such as 'don't let the smoking gun be a mushroom cloud over New York', designed to invoke the nightmare of terrorist nuclear strike on a US city. Such messages were deceptive, in that they involved distortion via exaggeration of the available intelligence assessments; but they were also coercive because they were clearly intended to appeal to peoples' fears and anxieties over the possibility of a chemical, biological or nuclear strike. A similar argument can be made about propaganda during the Cold War period, a large amount of which was based upon fear mongering with regard to the threat posed by the other side (Rawnsley 1999). For example, the spectre of the Red Army invading Western Europe was part of the popular mindset amongst Western publics, even though the likelihood of Red Army tanks rolling across Western Europe was miniscule, if non-existent. Cold War insecurity and paranoia can only explain part of the official discourse that highlighted this unlikely scenario.

A further category is *deception through misdirection* (Bakir 2013), which entails producing and disseminating true information but which is intended to direct public attention away from problematic issues. For example, Bakir (2013) analysed British and US management of the public revelation of the Bush administration's secret torture-intelligence policy and British complicity. This entailed instigating numerous investigations and inquiries across the USA and UK. These were utilized to misdirect attention to a narrow part of policy failure (e.g. inadequate military training on how to handle detainees) and away from deeper issues. These deeper issues included the existence of a secret torture-intelligence policy, torture through 'Enhanced Interrogation Techniques', the fact that the CIA was central to this policy, and the complicity of other nations.

A key point to take on board here is that deceptive communication involves much more than the telling of bare faced lies: the processes are usually more subtle manipulations of information that, in the final analysis, can create significant deceptions. When one recognizes that *distortion, omission* and *misdirection* are key facets of deception, and also how widespread such activities are across the political realm, one starts to appreciate how important deception is to contemporary politics.

*Sites of Production*

Propaganda and 'distorted' communication is not just the preserve, of course, of governments and, in the contemporary world, we can readily identify a number of important production sites: think tanks, NGOs, academia and intelligence agency network.

For example, think tanks can be used as vehicles in order to generate information and, frequently, operate in ways which reflect the interests and agenda of their sponsors (Smith, 1993). Although not necessarily always part of contributing towards manipulated and propagandized representations of particular issues, sometimes they are, such as, for example, the Henry Jackson Society (HJS), a think tank founded in 2005 and presented as bipartisan. (Griffin et al 2015). The HJS, funded by an array of undisclosed donors, has been active in 'promoting a strongly pro-Israel agenda, organizing anti-Islam activities … (and) advocating a transatlantic military and security regime' (Griffin et al 2015: 74). Interestingly, and as revealed in a leaked document, HJS, also planned co-ordinated activities aimed at discrediting Noam Chomsky via influencing mainstream

media journalists (Sayeed, 2016). Clearly, shaping the information environment and, arguably, manipulating opinions (a.k.a propaganda) has been a central objective of this think tank.

NGOs have also been implicated in the production of propagandistic information. For example, in relation to the on-going and catastrophic war in Syria (2011-present), organisations such as Amnesty International (AI) have played a critical role in influencing public perceptions with regard to that conflict and, in particular, maintaining support for claims that the Assad government is responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. However, a number of questions have been raised about the impartiality of the organisation with respect to this conflict. For example, Professor Tim Hayward has analysed the evidence AI has used to support some of its claims and found that they have not always followed their own protocols when producing their analysis. As such, some of their claims remain unsubstantiated and, potentially, contribute to a distorted understanding of that conflict (Hayward, 2017). Other NGOs in the Syria case, it has been claimed, are set up in large part to generate propaganda. The well-known White Helmets, who are presented as an independent organisation set up to save civilians, appear to be far from impartial. For example, journalist Vanessa Beeley has argued that the public perception of the White Helmets is largely inaccurate.[iv] The organisation was actually established in 2013 by James Le Mesurier, a former British military intelligence officer and is funded by both the British Foreign Office and USAID (Mason 2017). It also operates closely with opposition groups, including those who are with Al Nusra/Tahrir al Sham (the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria), and only out of opposition-held areas (Beeley 2015). They are criticised, as such, for facilitating a misleading perception of what is going on in Syria. More broadly, the White Helmets appear to be an extreme manifestation of the problem of the 'integration of humanitarian' aid strategies with military operations which has been witnessed in the last fifteen years' (Barnett 2005; Robinson 2017). The utility of such activities for propaganda purposes is without question. Indeed, a film about the White Helmets was even awarded an Oscar in 2016.[v]

Academia is not immune from propaganda activities and can itself become part of the broader propaganda apparatus. For example, Herring and Robinson (2003) argued that, to a large extent, the filters identified in the propaganda model as acting upon the media are also relevant to academia. Reliance upon grants, wishing to curry favour with official sources, as well as ideological imperatives, all mean that academia is far less free from the effects of power than is often assumed (See also Coser 1965; Mills 1968; Flaks 1991). For example, Simpson's *Science of Coercion* (1994) draws upon a variety of sources, including FOI releases, and carefully documents the relationship between the fledgling academic discipline of communication science/studies and US psychological operations (psy ops). He highlights powerfully the interdependence between the academy and the US government and makes a powerful case that, in a very fundamental sense, communication science/studies is shaped, to this day, by the imperatives of political power.

Finally, the intelligence services are key producers and disseminators of propaganda in contemporary liberal democracies. For example, long before the now notorious intelligence-based WMD allegations made against Iraq during the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, British intelligence was involved in manipulating evidence in order to promote the impression that Iraq had an ongoing WMD programme. From 1991 onwards the MI6 Operation Rockingham was involved in cherry picking intelligence from the UN weapons inspections (set up after Gulf War 1) in order to, as a former chief UN weapons inspector put it, skew 'UK intelligence about Iraqi WMD towards a preordained outcome that was more in line with British government policy that it was reflective of the truth' (Curtis 2004). Such activities were geared toward influencing the UN Security Council but also most likely designed to help maintain public support for the UK sanctions regime against Iraq. Operation Mass Appeal, initiated in the late 1990s, was precisely geared towards influencing public opinion by exaggerating the threat posed by Iraqi WMD. Finally, propaganda activities extend beyond attempts to influence publics via mainstream media and include popular culture propaganda. For example, Schou (2016) has documented the close involvement between the CIA and Hollywood. The relationships here range from mutual exploitation, through co-optation, and on

to more direct patterns of censorship. The overall net objective is to manipulate beliefs and attitudes in ways that are conducive to the interests of the US government.

It is important to note here that, when discussing matters of political deception, there is frequently the danger of either presenting such processes as overly 'conspiratorial' or suggesting some kind of unified and monolithic propaganda machine. First and foremost, careful thought needs to be given, when researching propaganda and deception, to the possibility that actors are misperceiving the information they receive, involved in self deception or simply oblivious to the deceptive nature of the process that they are involved in (Herring and Robinson 2014). Second, and more importantly, the preceding discussion with respect to sites of production suggests a complex and fluid reality whereby a variety of groups and organizations work toward common goals, in circumstance where interests are shared, by proactively seeking to 'shape the information space'. The propaganda, and potential deception that might accompany these attempts to 'mobilise bias' (Schnattsneider 1960) emerges from the concerted activities of multiple groups. As Miller (2002) explains, when explaining the importance of understanding how ideology and power work:

> Rather than seek power in some mysterious unobservable process of ideological interpellation or articulation, or simply in understanding language, we must seek it in the actions of real people in the (would-be) secret (but sometimes discoverable) low conspiracies which are a continuous and inevitable part of capitalist rule; in censorship, spin, lobbying, public relations, marketing and advertising; in the institutions of 'disinformation and distraction' as Raymond Williams put it.

Following on from this point, it should also be understood that ideology, understood as an interest linked world view which can be internalized, believed, understood and acted upon by individuals, can be both augmented and reinforced by the OPC activities we are describing here. Indeed, as much as ideology might influence OPC activities, it is also the case that these activities are a key part of the process through which ideology is 'created'. The key point here is that the line between ideology and propaganda is continually changing and, perhaps, at times difficult to discern: So whether someone involved in an OPC campaign is producing material is doing so because of their pre-existing ideology, or whether they are knowingly generating deceptive propaganda, is something that needs careful consideration when examining case studies and processes. Indeed, it is precisely this interface between propaganda and ideology which makes the study of OPC, propaganda and deception of such pivotal importance in understanding how political power is exercised.

Deception then, involving manipulation via propagandistic OPC, is a key strategy through which political power is exercised in democracies. Via subtle processes involving distortion, omission and misdirection peoples' beliefs and behaviours can be shaped. Less subtle process include deception through lying and coercive deception and, in addition, the interplay between ideology and propaganda needs to be acknowledged. All of these processes are certainly never always successful, and powerful actors are not omnipotent. However, the resources devoted to these activities, the range of sites across which propaganda production occurs, and variety of forms that deception can take, should alert us to the importance of these manipulative processes in contemporary democracies and make clear their importance for understanding how political power is exercised.

## 3. Propaganda Here and Now: Deception in the Digital Era

As noted in the introduction, current political debate has been substantially shaped by the perceived crisis over 'fake news'. In large part emerging from the 2016 US presidential between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump, it is now widely believed that the phenomenon of 'fake news' has reached epidemic proportions. For many, the problem of 'fake news' is located either in the realm of social media, including alternative and independent media, or is a problem emanating from

foreign sources. For example, Bennett and Livingston (2018) argue that the problem is largely associated with 'nationalist (primarily radical right) and foreign (commonly Russian) strategies to undermine institutional legitimacy and destabilise centre parties, governments and elections' (Bennett and Livingston 2018): 122). This particular problem definition has been reflected by much of the emerging empirical research which is concerned with the spread of disinformation through social media and alternative/independent media. As much as this may be a real problem, 'fake news', disinformation and propaganda have also emanated from established political parties, vested interests and mainstream media. For example, a highly significant political narrative of the last two years has concerned the Russia-gate scandal involving multiple allegations that Trump has colluded with Russia and that Russia actively interfered in the US election, in part through spreading 'fake news'. Despite all of the attention to the Russian collusion allegation, little substantive evidence appears to have emerged from the year-long Senate inquiry. Indeed, it has now transpired that the notorious Trump dossier detailing allegations of links with Russia, which appeared to have played a key role with respect to instigating investigations into President Trump, was in fact commissioned by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and was authored by ex-UK MI6 intelligence officer Jonathan Steele: The issue is now subject to legal proceedings raising the possibility that, it might well emerge that Russia-gate itself was a propaganda campaign designed to marginalise the Trump administration (McGovern 2017; McKeigue, Miller and Robinson 2018). At the same time, there has been little sustained mainstream media attention to the content of the DNC (Democratic National Committee) leaks/hack which have fuelled so much of the controversy regarding the US elections and alleged Russian *information warfare*. Indeed, these leaked/hacked emails, released by Wikileaks, indicate that the DNC actively favoured Clinton[vi] over Bernie Sanders during the primaries whilst evidence of question fixing with CNN was also evidenced.[vii] There are no serious challenges to the authenticity of these emails and, as such, they do not appear to be actual examples of 'fake news'. This did not, however, stop mainstream media linking Russia with the leaks and conflating all of this with a 'fake news'/propaganda narrative.[viii]

A similar pattern of omission and distortion can be seen with respect the prevalent discourse that presents Russia as the new threat to the West where we would appear to be witnessing the emergence of a new 'Cold War' and one that is focused on 'hybrid' threats emanating from Russia. The general presentation of this problem focuses on Western attempts to counter a hostile and aggressive Russia with, for example, the creation of organisations designed to defend against Russian cyberwarfare (EU 2016 & 2017). The central drift of the new 'Cold War' discourse is that, beyond its alleged nefarious disinformation campaigns, Russia stands accused of aggression in the Ukraine and Syria. Whatever the accuracy of such claims, what is ignored in this particular narrative is Western support and involvement in multiple wars since 9/11 and transparently aggressive wars aimed at overthrowing 'enemy' governments (specifically, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria) (Robinson 2017). Absent also from this narrative is the extensive involvement of the West in propaganda operations in recent years: for example, and with respect to the post 9/11 'war on terror', it was revealed by the UK government inquiry into the Iraq War that Tony Blair had expressed the need for a 'tight knit propaganda' campaign (Robinson 2017: 67) whilst NATO has sought to disseminate propaganda aimed at discrediting the Russian government. For example, NATO contracted a British firm Iota Global, a part of the SCL group which also included Cambridge Analytica, which has been alleged to have played a role in Russian attempts to interfere in the US presidential election. According to a leaked document, confirmed as genuine by its author, this involved capacity building in anti-Russian strategic communications with Moldovan, Georgian and Ukrainian participants (Tatham 2015). Another leaked document shows significant funding for Ukrainian organisations (including the military and civil society groups) by the British government's 'conflict pool' funding stream in 2014-5. Among the objectives were to 'discredit' Russian 'political and military leaders'.

Overall, then, it should be kept in mind that propaganda and deception are tools likely to be employed by a range of political actors, not simply those challenging establishment and mainstream positions within Western liberal democracies and 'official enemies'. Future research agendas should

reflect this kind of objective and balanced approach, and avoid perceiving propaganda and deception as the preserve of only particular political actors. With this point in mind, what are some of the key digital propaganda and deception techniques which are now being employed?

*Sock puppets, Digital Propaganda, Bots and Internet Censorship*

In fact, from the point of view those engaged in deception and propaganda, the Internet environment facilitates a variety of invasive activities aimed at persuasion and influence many of which are manipulative. For instance, exploiting the digital age's capacity for 'mass self-communication' (Castells, 2009) is the use of public relations techniques such as the 'front group' where vested interests are disguised by ostensibly independent groups. Also, online identities can be assumed and used deceptively – a phenomena known as the 'sock puppet' – a fake online persona. Although often used playfully, they are also used in economic and political influence strategies – e.g. Stella Artois (Watson 2012) – and the Special Operations Command of the US military (Fielding and Cobain, 2011). Another example of digital manipulation and deception concerns the work of Britain's GCHQ (Cheltenham-based communications and intelligence HQ) revealed by the Snowden leaks. These show that the GCHQ's propaganda unit, the Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group (JTRIG), possess a range of tools designed to alter the very fabric of digital communication through online covert action including the publication of fake materials and deceptive content. For instance, 'Clean weep' is said to be able to 'masquerade Facebook wall posts for individuals or entire countries;' 'Gateway' can 'artificially increase traffic to a website;' 'Changeling' provides the 'ability to spoof any email address and send email under that identity,' and 'Havok', a 'real-time website cloning technique allowing on-the-fly alterations' (Greenwald, 2014).

Also, the rise of the political bot (Woolley and Howard, 2017) highlights the sophistication of strategies designed to exercise influence and control in the online environment. Social media bot technology involves 'programs that communicate across multiple devices to perform some task' and 'share the property of deploying messages and replicating themselves' (Woolley and Howard, 2017: 628). Whilst frequently used for activities relating to 'spam, DDoS attacks, theft of confidential information' (ibid.), they can and have been used in overtly political contexts. As Woolley and Howard (2017: 630) explain:

> In Mexico, bots have been used on Twitter by both ruling and minority parties. ... bots are programmed to co-opt the opposition's hashtags and send out thousands of garbled or propaganda-laden tweets to block any counter-organizational or communication efforts. In the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia bots have been used to pad politicians' follower lists. These fake followers can be purchased for nominal prices with the intent of making a user seem more popular or influential.

During the 2010 US midterm elections and Massachusetts special election, social bots were reportedly used to support some candidates and smear their opponents, by creating thousands of tweets pointing to websites with 'fake news' (Metaxas and Mustafaraj, 2012).

Finally, at present there appears to be a concerted drive to develop methods of identifying so-called 'fake news' with major internet giants such as *Facebook*, *Google* and *Twitter* moving toward a substantial attempt to manipulate information on the Internet so as to limit information claimed or perceived to be 'fake news'. Some of this is being driven by pressure from governments and the use of software and AI (artificial intelligence) in order to censor and filter information perceived or claimed to be bogus may lead to a significant degree of censorship across the Internet. The very real danger here is that, ultimately, these developments might lead to a situation where the Internet loses its open and democratic potential and becomes, broadly speaking, a tool for manipulation by powerful actors in society.

## Conclusion

Deception and propaganda are, then, alive and well in contemporary politics. As a political strategy rationalized and justified by a number of ideological positions (e.g. realism and neo-conservatism amongst others) its use is prevalent not only by the 'usual suspects', such as authoritarian or totalitarian states, but also within contemporary liberal democracies. As a practice, deceptive propaganda is inherently undemocratic, although under certain exceptional circumstances it can be justified, and can contribute to a significant erosion of the public sphere and democratic politics. Indeed, the scale of propaganda activities, the resources devoted to them and range of sites across which such activities can be identified (think tanks, NGOs, academia and intelligence services, coupled with the relatively discrete ways through which deception can be realized (omission, distortion and misdirection), means that it is highly likely that many social scientists are underestimating the scale of these activities and, accordingly, the problems they may be raising for democracy. Add to this the opportunities now provided by the Internet and digital communication for manipulation of information, it should be clear that there is a powerful case for sustained attention to deception and propaganda.

Future research should be directed as follows:. First, case studies exploring deception across the full range of political activity are necessary to establish the scale and extent of deception in the contemporary political realm. Second, understanding the complex networks of actors involved in 'shaping the information' environment, and their interests and objectives, can help social scientists understand and explain how information comes to be manipulated and the precise mechanisms that lie behind deceptive propaganda campaigns. Third, theoretical work is needed in order to understand better the interplay between ideology and deceptive propaganda. Fourth, normative political theory can be engaged in order to develop robust and fine-grained frameworks that can be employed in order to establish the exceptional circumstances when deceptive propaganda might be argued to be necessary and justified; also necessary here is the development of more ethical forms of persuasion which are both consensual and democratic (Bakir et al, 2018). Fifth, digital and Internet-based propaganda needs significant attention so that we can better understand the tactics and tools now being employed by powerful actors. Finally, attention needs to be paid to developing educational strategies that provide citizens with the skills and knowledge to defend against deceptive propaganda and navigate successfully the diverse information sources now available.

Ultimately, there is much at stake. Deception as a political strategy and the ability of powerful actors to manipulate in the current digital environment mean that research and understanding is urgently needed into this issue area. And, for all the allegations and fearmongering, the biggest problem lies, arguably, not in the behavior of some foreign actor (such as Russia) or independent/alternative media, but within existing institutions including mainstream media, corporate internet giants and democratic governments themselves. It is here that scholarly attention should be focused and with the primary objective being to reclaim the public sphere and democracy from practices of deception.

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