THE SOCIAL MEDIA MODEL OF PROPAGANDA (OR HOW TO BUILD A PROPAGANDA MACHINE)

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Abstract

Politics today is dominated by what Naim (2023) calls the 3 Ps: populism, polarization and post-truth. To this we should add a fourth: propaganda. The word, in English at least, still has something of a twentieth century feel about it, conjuring up images of graphic posters from the First and Second World Wars. But while styles of political persuasion have existed for as long as human society has, the role propaganda plays in our lives today is arguably more intense than it has been in decades. And whereas a few years ago, Zuboff (2019) talked of an age of 'surveillance capitalism', this has now transformed into an era of 'computational totalitarianism'. This paper examines how the relationship between language and technology has produced the environment which has allowed the malevolent radicalism of today's politics to flourish, focusing specifically on the ways in which modern communications technologies provide affordances which complement almost precisely the fundamental components in major theories of propaganda.

1. Propaganda machines

In his book *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Minds* (1965), Jacques Ellul argued that propaganda should be understood not merely as a set of messages or ideas, but as a technological phenomenon, that is, a systematic, organized technique designed to influence large populations. He emphasized that modern propaganda relies on communications technology to reach vast audiences in an efficient and effective manner, making it inseparable from the tools that deliver it. For Ellul, in other words, propaganda is a methodical application of technical means to shape public opinion and behaviour on a large scale (Ellul 1964; Marlin 2014).

Throughout the twentieth century a number of technologies were designed and developed which one could call, quite literally, propaganda machines. These can be defined as physical devices or pieces of equipment specifically engineered or adapted for the large-scale dissemination of ideological messages. Unlike ordinary media tools, they were purpose-built to deliver controlled narratives to targeted audiences, often bypassing or restricting alternative sources of information.

There are multiple examples of innovations of this sort. There was, for instance, the Monroe bomb. Developed during World War Two by US Army Air Forces Captain James Monroe, this was created for the sole purpose of distributing propaganda among enemy forces (PWD SHAEF 1945). The device consisted of a cardboard cylinder packed with propaganda leaflets, which was then inserted into a bomb casing. Each bomb could carry up to 80,000 leaflets. Dropped from an aircraft over enemy territory, the bomb would descend to a preset altitude before a small detonator exploded the cylinder, scattering its contents across the landscape. The leaflets, addressed directly to enemy soldiers, sought to sow doubt about the cause being fought for and to undermine morale. Other nations developed similar devices – the Germans, Soviets, and North Vietnamese all designed their own versions, operating in much the same way. Such weapons have not disappeared either: videos circulate today of Russian forces deploying leaflet bombs in Ukraine (Yahoo! News 2024).

The Monroe bomb was, in essence, a purpose-built propaganda machine, engineered to spread ideologically loaded messages to the widest possible audience. By the end of the war, the Allies had dropped an estimated 500 million leaflets behind enemy lines in Europe. Further notable examples of propaganda machinery include the *Volksempfänger* or 'People's Receiver', a cheap, mass-produced radio introduced in Nazi Germany in 1933 that was designed to give the population easy access to the regime's broadcasts while limiting their ability to tune in to foreign stations. In the Soviet Union of the 1910s and 1920s, agit-trains and agit-boats were sent across the countryside, equipped with printing presses, cinemas, libraries and lecturers to spread Bolshevik ideology to remote areas (Heftberger 2015; Kenez 1985). During the Second World War, Britain built the Aspidistra radio transmitter, a vast shortwave installation in Sussex that was created specifically to beam 'black propaganda' (i.e. misleading information disguised as coming from a trusted source) and fake German broadcasts into occupied Europe (Newton 2019).

The Nazis also made use of mobile film units – trucks fitted with projectors and screens that travelled to rural communities to show propaganda movies, including the films of Leni Riefenstahl. The Soviets developed mobile printing trucks in the 1920s and 1930s to mass-produce agitational posters on the move, while Imperial Japan employed portable radio broadcasting units under the banner of the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' to disseminate pro-Japanese, anti-Western messages across occupied territories in Asia (Magpantay 2024). Each of these devices and systems functioned as purpose-built machinery for the distribution of propaganda.

From Harold Lasswell (1927; 1938) and Walter Lippmann (1927), through Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1988), to twenty-first century scholarship on computational propaganda (e.g. Woolley 2023), theorists have stressed the way that propaganda is inseparable from the technological systems that deliver it. In some cases, as with most of the examples above, technology is used to facilitate the dissemination of propaganda; in others the act of engaging with the technology is a constituent part of the way the propaganda works. It is this latter role of technology which I will explore in this paper in respect to how social media can be viewed as the ideal 'propaganda machine'.

2. Social media, disinformation and the future of open debate

This paper arises from a conference which focuses on three concepts which play a prominent part in today's politics: social media, disinformation and the future of open debate. Each of these come from a different conceptual category, yet they are nonetheless closely connected and together provide some of the theoretical foundations for an examination of the social media model of propaganda. Social media is a communications technology, along with a set of social practices that have grown up around the use of that technology (Baym 2015; Waisbord 2018). Disinformation is a 'genre' of communication, in the broadest sense of the word (Bakhtin 1986). In fact, one could characterize it as one genre (fake or fabricated information) masquerading as another (reliable news or information) (Tandoc *et al.* 2018). And open debate is part genre-of-communication, part social-ideal. Especially when coupled with the idea of 'the future', it refers to practices which we consider important and necessary for an equitable and democratic society (Habermas 1989), and thus to which we, as a society, aspire.

What then do the three have in common? One thing that links them, particularly in the context of political discourse, is that they are all components of the role that propaganda plays in society today. For the purposes of this discussion, propaganda is political communication which draws on deceptive means to manipulate people's beliefs and, ideally, actions in line with the agenda of the propagandist (Jowett and O'Donnell 1986).

The spreading of disinformation is a key strategy in propaganda programmes, and one which has been consistently highlighted in popular and media discourse over the last nine or ten years (ever since the 'fake news' crisis of 2015/16) (Maci *et al.* 2023). Social media is a very important technology for the spreading of disinformation and the effective use of propaganda (Lilleker and Surowiec 2020). And open debate is antithetical to the way that propaganda works as a form of communication. Or to put it another way, propaganda is primarily a monologic rather than dialogic form of communication which acts to close down public discussion and debate (Marková 2008). And, by closing down public discussion and debate, propaganda aims to corrode democratic politics.

3. Building a propaganda machine

Let us return to the idea of a propaganda machine and the hypothetical question of what such a machine, if purposely designed, might look like today. The first step in designing such a machine is to identify the key features of propaganda campaigns, and then look to how a medium of communication can best facilitate these features. Propaganda campaigns can take many different forms and use a variety of techniques, but it is possible to distil these down into a short list of generic features (Seargeant 2026). We can start with a very simple model of communication which consists of the following four elements: Speaker – message – medium – audience.

The formula goes that a speaker transmits a message via a medium or channel to a receiver/audience. This is the skeleton structure for communication (Lasswell 1948; Shannon and Weaver 1949), and although theoretically rather primitive, is useful as a jumping-off point for this analysis.

Propaganda then is a type of communication which manages the following dynamics between these four elements. It involves (1) a particular relationship between speaker and audience; and (2) a particular type of message; which has (3) a particular aim. Identification and theorization of these various elements have a long history in the study of propaganda (e.g. Pratkanis and Aronson 2001; Taylor 2003; Tchakhotine 1940), and in drawing on this we can usefully categorize the way that these three dynamics are, in turn, made up of eight component parts:

1. The relationship between speaker and audience involves:

- Targeting a specific audience

This is to say, using tailored messaging for specific groups (e.g. soldiers, civilians, opponents). Where possible, this involves surveying and measuring the mood of the public, and then shaping the messaging accordingly. In this way one creates 'scientifically' targeted messaging;

- Repetition and saturation

Propaganda should be ubiquitous and relentless. The aim is to flood society with your message so that it becomes completely normalized;

- Controlling the flow of information

This involves tactics such as cherry-picking facts, giving only one side of the argument, and using various forms of censorship so as to boost your message and block out alternative points of view. Again, this helps normalize your message and give the impression that it is the mainstream, if not sole, way of understanding the world.

2. The type of message involves:

- Use of emotional appeal

In order best to persuade people, content should provoke a strong emotional reaction using fear, pride, anger, hope etc., and in this way, bypass critical thinking;

- Glorification and demonization

The messaging should always vilify your opponents and idealize your allies. Effective propaganda directs people's anger by clearly identifying who or what to blame for problems in the world. This can, and often does, involve creating a principal enemy who becomes the target of all attacks;

- Simplified messaging

Messaging should avoid abstract ideas and appeal instead only to the emotions. It should constantly repeat the same few ideas over and again; use stereotyped phrases and slogans to make ideas easily digestible; and label people and events with distinctive, easy-to-remember phrases;

- Authority and trust

Messaging should cite experts, leaders, or 'common sense' so as to legitimize its claims in the eyes of the target audience.

3. The particular aim consists of:

- The call to action

This directs the target audience's behaviour (e.g. voting, enlisting, boycotting), and encourages them to participate in the political process in some form or other.

Based on these key features, an effective propaganda machine should therefore have the following capabilities:

- Be able to identify and target a specific audience, using research to survey the mood of this audience and adapt the messaging accordingly;
- Use emotional appeals rather than reason to ensure that its messages are persuasive. Create messages which are simple to understand, often involving slogans and constant repetition;
- Be able to saturate the environment with these messages so that there is 'no escape' from them;
- Cite so-called 'experts' and other authorities to give credibility to its messages;
- Identify some group in society to label as its enemy and blame them for everything that is wrong with the world;
- Control the flow of information so that only the stories that help push its own agenda get told;
- And finally, encourage participation from the public so that they become part of the political movement for which the propaganda is advocating.

If we look back at the leaflet bombs, we can see they only carry out a couple of these elements: *targeting an audience* and *spreading the message as widely as possible*. The rest of the features are covered by the leaflets themselves which are, in essence, a technology that goes right back to the early days of the printing press (Bagchi 2016). Figure 1 shows how 'legacy' media – newspapers, radio and television – cover these components, which allows them to be exploited as forms of propaganda (despite not being designed specifically for that purpose).

So how do modern media technologies facilitate this list of propaganda components? Let us look through these components one by one.

- Targeting a specific audience

An important element in systemized propaganda programmes from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards has been the use of technologies for surveying and measuring the mood of the public and then adapting the messaging accordingly. Nazi Germany's Ministry of Propaganda during World War Two, for instance, carried out extensive polling in order to 'take the pulse of the population', and then used this to refine the content of their communication (Taylor 2003). In eras such as this, the act of broadcasting and the act of measuring the effect of that broadcasting were separate.

With digital media, both these capabilities are built into the same technology. The business model for social media companies is not simply engagement – keeping users on the platform so they can be exposed to more advertising – but harvesting behavioural data which can then be used to create more persuasive content (Zuboff 2019). In other words, social media companies combine within themselves capabilities which are perfectly suited for propaganda. Social media data can be used to categorize audiences by

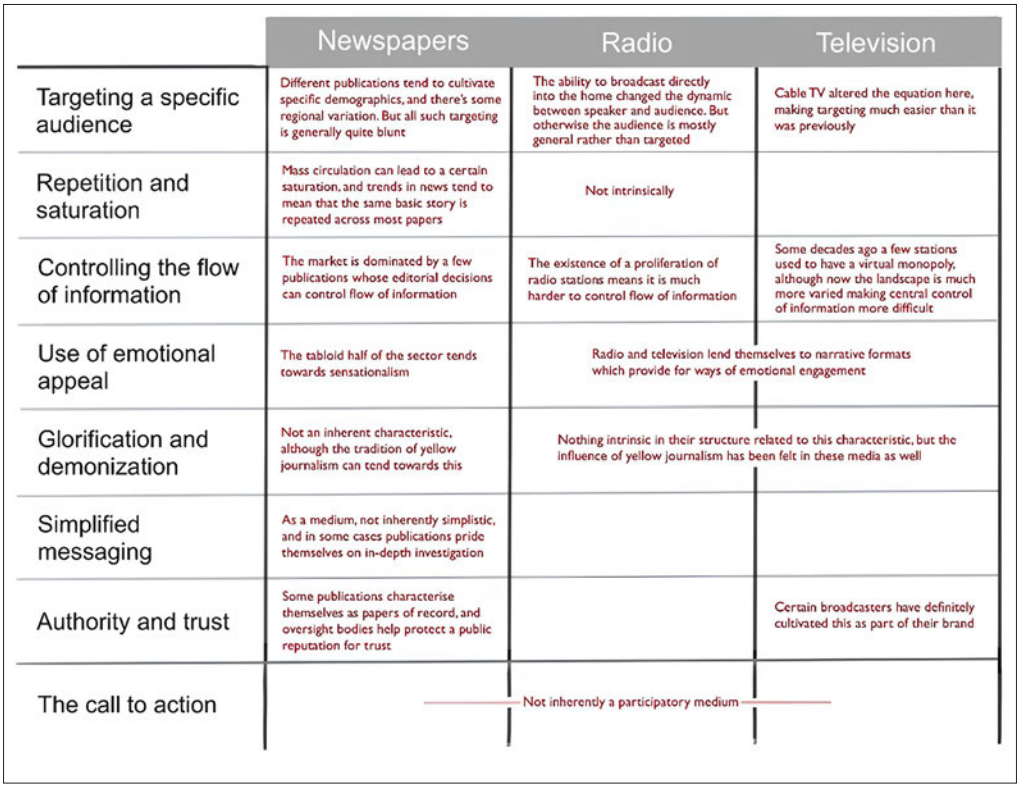

Figure 1. Legacy media and the core elements of propaganda communication

psychological traits (fear-driven, tribalistic, altruistic), and methods such as sentiment analysis (Wankhade *et al.* 2022) can be used to track emotional responses to adjust messaging (e.g. shift from anger to fear if resistance emerges), resulting in the crafting of personalized propaganda that speaks directly to individual concerns. There was outrage a decade ago when Cambridge Analytica did (or at least, attempted to do) precisely this, but the capabilities for it are an essential part of the business model (Briant 2022).

- Repetition and saturation

A second point about propaganda is that it should be ubiquitous and relentless. The message needs to be internalized by the audience as common sense, as 'just the way things are'. Propaganda aims to create or bolsters a worldview, and one which is apparently shared by the majority of other people. Again, the design of social media is almost ideally suited to creating this impression.

The message disseminated by social media is not simply broadcast by a single or small group of sources. It is repeated by numerous individual accounts, both real and fabricated (Du *et al.* 2019). The volume of posts on a given topic not only gives persuasive weight to the message, it also makes it appear as if this is the standard perspective on that topic.

If everyone is repeating the message then it is more likely to be viewed as consensus opinion (Woolley 2023), which in turn translates to it being seen as 'the truth'. Virality, memes, the social media influencer, and social media bots are all social-media-native phenomena which are centred around wide dissemination and repetition of a message.

- Controlling the flow of information

I mentioned earlier that propaganda is monologic rather than dialogic. The image of social media as the modern-day public square (Spaid 2019) would suggest that dialogism – including open debate – is an essential characteristic of these platforms. But algorithmic manipulation of the feed means that what people post to social media is always curated, and this curation, while hidden, is always controlling the flow of information (Gausen *et al.* 2022). Alongside technological control of information flow, social practices such as cancelling, pile-ons and other forms of social attack and exclusion, as well as phenomena such as the filter bubble and echo chamber, also restrict the flow of ideas and information.

Many of these are types of informal or social censorship which act as a form of normative social control (Post 1998; Ng 2020). So the mixture of the design and the social consequences of the design offer immense possibilities for controlling the flow of information.

- Use of emotional appeal

Propaganda has always exploited the human weakness for the sensational and the emotive, in no small part because this bypasses reasoned reflection (Martel *et al.* 2020).

Social media algorithms tend to promote content which attracts attention and engagement; they do this because engagement is the basis of the business model by which social media companies operate (Bhargava and Velasquez 2021). And content which attracts attention is that which provokes a strong emotional reaction and/or is sensational.

Emotion aroused by conflict is particularly effective. So once again, the style of expression encouraged by the platforms naturally tends towards the emotionally provocative.

- Glorification and demonization

The concepts of glorification and demonization are essentially both processes of taking an extremist view on attitudes towards people or events. They simplify complex realities into absolute categories (see below), leaving little room for nuance or moderation. Both rely on strong emotional appeals rather than rational reflection, glorification by inspiring admiration or unquestioning loyalty, and demonization by provoking fear, anger or hatred (Decker and Lord 2023). The need that social media culture has for conflict to attract attention means that extremist views – ones which people feel compelled to attack or defend – is again almost an essential element of the business model.

- Simplified messaging

Extremist and emotionally-charged views are best served by simplism. Simplism strips the nuance and complexity from issues, reducing them to basic ideas possessed of an immediate resonance (Andreottola and Sartori 2025). In other words, simplism is an almost natural by-product of emotional appeal and glorification/demonization. Or,

to put it in more straightforward terms, platforms reward engagement; and simple, punchy content gets the most engagement.

In addition to this, format constraints of the platforms – number of characters allowed, length of video etc. – favour simplism, as does the 'infinite scrolling' design, which means that users consume huge volumes of content rapidly, with little time for reflection. All of which results in what one could characterize as meme culture – with memes being inherently reductive in the way they flatten arguments into punchlines (Anderau and Barbarrusa 2024).

- Authority and trust

Authority is a basic component of Aristotle's three-part model of rhetoric in that all parts of the model depend on the speaker's perceived credibility and right to persuade (Aristotle 2007; Amossy 2001). Propaganda regularly draws on this as part of its persuasive toolkit, but does so in deceptive or manipulative ways. The 'democratization of voice' which social media was lauded for in its early days (Benkler 2006), whereby the publishing of opinions was opened up to a far larger cohort of people than had been possible with one-to-many technologies like television and the newspaper, led to the undermining of traditional sources of authority, and their replacement with a wide of array of alternatives (Enroth 2023). This has vastly altered the criteria for how people measure authority and trust, which in turn provides perfect conditions for propaganda to manufacture legitimacy for its alternative view of reality.

- The call to action

The final component for propaganda is participation. An alternative (or at least closely related) term for social media, popular some years ago, was 'participatory media', while the defining feature of Web 2.0 (another term frequently used in the 2010s) was that the audience did not simply consume content, they contributed to its creation (leading to the coinage of words such as 'prosumer' – a blend of producer and consumer) (Howard 2008).

Participation at its most basic includes liking or reposting content. This has the effect not only of spreading that content more widely, but also prompting the algorithm to promote it even further. But from a propaganda perspective, participation also has an important psychological effect. Not only does propaganda work towards the specific goal of influencing thought and action, but through acts of participation the audience becomes psychologically invested in the endeavour (Ambuehl 2022; Leiser 2022).

The upshot of all this is that social media design boosts a style of discourse which matches all aspects of the basic narrative, stylistic and interactive structure of propaganda.

4. A propaganda analysing machine

One argument that follows from this cross-referencing of the architecture and affordances of social media with the essential elements of propaganda is that modern social media platforms already have many features of a propaganda machine, yet there is a difference between them related to intent. Social media platforms are promoted (often by themselves) as neutral infrastructures that allow users to share content and

communicate with each other (Ali 2024; Chander and Krishnamurthy 2018). People supposedly post freely, and algorithms are there to guide them towards relevant content. A propaganda machine, on the other hand, would be something deliberately engineered to manipulate public perception and control what people think. It does not rely on organic engagement, but instead actively manipulates the spread of content, and controls what people see and do not see. In other words, a social media platform would only become a propaganda machine when those in power learn how to exploit its structure for ideological control. The other supposed difference is ownership. Social media platforms are owned by tech companies driven primarily by profit, whereas a propaganda machine would be controlled by a government, political party, or other ideological group with a clear political agenda.

Which brings me to the last point I want to discuss: the concept of 'affordances'. In the context of social media, 'affordances' refer to the built-in features and design choices that shape how users interact with a platform – enabling or constraining certain actions and thus influencing user behaviour. An important point about them is that they are part technical – the result of the design of the platform – and part the product of a user's understanding of their availability and how they work (Tagg *et al.* 2017). Affordances thus refer to the capabilities the platform has *and* the knowledge that people have to exploit this. As such, affordances inevitably exist differently for different people even when they are stable across a platform.

Whereas we mostly talk of affordances in terms of the average user of a platform, it can also be useful to think of them as they apply to those who have oversight or control of the technology or have the technological know-how to leverage full aspects of the platform. Or to put it another way, how they apply to those in a position to take full advantage of, in the context of this discussion, the propaganda possibilities of the platform.

What has become increasingly evident recently, with the rapid consolidation of power among a small number of extraordinarily wealthy technology company owners, is the extent to which control over digital infrastructures now translates into an unparalleled capacity to shape public discourse and influence political processes (Norden and Weiner 2025). This concentration of technological and economic power reveals how the affordances of social media platforms, initially designed to maximize engagement and behavioural prediction – can be strategically exploited to advance particular ideological ends. Whereas in earlier periods the pursuit of profit and the pursuit of political power were often represented as distinct and even competing motivations for the tech industry (Lindman *et al.* 2023), in the contemporary digital economy this separation has largely dissolved, as economic gain and political influence have become deeply intertwined within the same networks of technological control and informational capital (Khanal *et al.* 2025).

Where does all this leave us? Viewing social media from the perspective of a propaganda model – and in doing so, analysing precisely what this entails – can provide us with a better understanding of the details and implications of the relationship between politics, technology and technology corporations. What we are witnessing at this present moment is a shift from an age of 'surveillance capitalism' to an era of what can perhaps be termed 'computational totalitarianism'.

As I have outlined, the structure of social media is such that it facilitates all the elements central to propaganda. The set-up of this mirrors the propaganda model of media put forward by Herman and Chomsky (1988) which, in broad terms, views corporate media as profit-driven entities that prioritize the selling of their audience to advertisers, rather than focusing on high-quality journalism which serves the public interest. The situation as concerns social media is that there is no pretence that platform is creating high-quality journalism – or indeed even promoting high-quality journalism. Surveillance capitalism in this respect is a modern updating of the 20th century propaganda model of media.

Yet what we have seen in the last few years is how easily the use of this technology can focus not just on economic exploitation of the population (which involves a marked capitalist-ideological element), but on the take-over of the entire political system. An example of the way that world leaders are aware of, and actively pursue, the affordances that this allows them was acknowledged recently in a meeting that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had with US influencers at the Israeli Consulate in New York. During the meeting he framed social media as a critical 'weapon' for his government and stated that, as methods of warfare evolve, Israel must adapt by fighting on the new frontlines, with social media platforms being the most important of these (Qarehgozlou 2025; Shamala 2025). He specifically highlighted the potential US deal to force the sale of TikTok, describing it as the 'most important purchase going on right now' and the role that Elon Musk, as owner of X, had been playing in US politics. The comments were made at a time of widespread international condemnation of Israel's military actions in Gaza and were presented as a strategy to solidify a support base in the US that Netanyahu said was 'being challenged systematically'. Netanyahu is hardly the only leader with this approach to the propaganda possibilities of social media platforms, of course (Meredith 2021; Stognei 2025).

Back in the early twentieth century there was a trend of thought that propaganda was essential for a well-functioning democracy. Here, for example, is Edward Bernays (2013: 160), one of the most important earliest theorists, on the subject:

> When used for social purposes, [propaganda] is among our most valuable contributions to the efficient functioning of modern society. The techniques can be subverted; demagogues can utilize the techniques for antidemocratic purposes with as much success as can those who employ them for socially desirable ends. The responsible leader, to accomplish social objectives, must therefore be constantly aware of the possibilities of subversion.

At present, it is probably fair to say that responsible and ethically-grounded leadership is in short supply. More troubling still is the nature of the contemporary communications ecosystem, which not only lends itself to propagandistic manipulation but, as detailed in this paper, is structurally optimized to facilitate this with unprecedented efficiency and reach.

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