



## Manufacturing Narratives: Propaganda, Political Communication, and the Shaping of Public Perception in the Digital Age

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### Abstract:

Propaganda has evolved from traditional forms of political persuasion into a complex system of narrative construction operating across conventional media, digital platforms, and social networks. Rather than relying solely on the dissemination of false information, contemporary propaganda operates through selective presentation, repetition, emotional appeal, framing, agenda-setting, and the strategic construction of political narratives. This paper examines how propaganda shapes the way individuals and societies interpret political events, actors, conflicts, and social issues. Drawing on theories of framing, agenda-setting, and the propaganda model, the study explores the relationship between media structures, political communication, and public perception, with particular attention to the transformation of propaganda in the digital age, where social media enables narratives to circulate rapidly and allows political actors, institutions, media organizations, and ordinary users alike to participate in their production and amplification. The paper further considers the challenges posed by misinformation, selective exposure, and algorithmically mediated communication. It argues that understanding contemporary propaganda requires moving beyond a simple truth/falsehood binary and instead examining how information is selected, framed, repeated, and contextualized to construct particular interpretations of reality.

**Keywords:** propaganda, framing, agenda-setting, political communication, digital media, misinformation, media literacy

## 1. Introduction

Propaganda has long been understood as a deliberate attempt to shape opinion and behavior in the service of a particular political or institutional interest. Classical treatments of the subject, from wartime studies of mass persuasion to Jowett and O'Donnell's (2019) enduring definition of propaganda as the systematic attempt to shape perceptions and direct behavior to achieve a desired response, tended to focus on the overt manipulation of information by identifiable state or institutional actors. Such accounts remain useful, but they no longer capture the full complexity of how public opinion is formed in contemporary societies. Today, the production of political meaning is distributed across an ecosystem of legacy broadcasters, cable news, digital-native outlets, algorithmically curated social platforms, and millions of individual users who share, comment on, and remix political content. Persuasion no longer travels in one direction, from a centralized source to a passive audience; it circulates, mutates, and accumulates legitimacy through repetition and peer endorsement.

This paper proceeds from the premise that the most consequential forms of contemporary propaganda rarely depend on outright falsehood. Outright lies are comparatively easy to identify, fact-check, and discredit. Far more durable and difficult to counter is propaganda that operates through selective presentation of true information, the strategic framing of events, the setting of a political agenda, and the exploitation of emotional and cognitive shortcuts that shape how audiences interpret what they see. This reframes the analytical problem: rather than asking only whether a given claim is true or false, scholars and citizens alike must ask how information has been selected, sequenced, framed, repeated, and contextualized to produce a particular interpretation of reality.

The paper is organized around five research questions that structure the analysis: (1) how propaganda constructs and promotes political narratives; (2) how framing and agenda-setting contribute to propaganda's effectiveness; (3) how digital media has transformed the production and dissemination of propaganda; (4) what role emotional appeals, repetition, and selective information play in shaping public perception; and (5) how media and information literacy can help individuals critically evaluate political narratives. Each question is addressed in turn, drawing on the propaganda model, framing theory, and agenda-setting theory as complementary rather than competing frameworks.

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## 2. Theoretical Framework

Three bodies of theory anchor this study: the propaganda model, framing theory, and agenda-setting theory. Although developed in different disciplinary traditions, the three converge on a shared insight — that public understanding of political reality is mediated, and that mediation is never neutral.

### 2.1 The Propaganda Model

Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model remains a foundational, if contested, account of how structural features of media ownership, advertising dependence, sourcing practices, "flak," and anti-communist (later, more broadly, ideological) framing combine to filter news content in ways that systematically favor elite and state interests. Mullen and Klaehn (2010) describe the model as a critical framework for analyzing how these five "filters" operate not through conspiratorial coordination but through the routine economic and organizational logic of commercial media. Klaehn (2002) offers a sympathetic but rigorous assessment of the model's strengths and limitations, noting that while it has been criticized for underestimating audience agency and journalistic autonomy, it remains valuable for directing attention to the structural conditions under which certain narratives are amplified and others marginalized. Pedro-Carañana, Broudy, and Klaehn (2018) extend the model into the digital era, arguing that its core logic — the systemic filtering of information in ways that serve concentrated economic and political power — persists even as the technological means of dissemination have multiplied.

### 2.2 Framing Theory

Where the propaganda model emphasizes structural filtering, framing theory addresses the discursive mechanisms by which meaning is constructed at the level of the text or message. Entman (2007) defines framing as the process of selecting and highlighting certain facets of a perceived reality while excluding others, thereby promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation. Crucially, framing bias, in Entman's account, need not involve factual inaccuracy; a report can be entirely truthful in its individual claims while still being systematically slanted through the selection of which facts, sources, and interpretive cues are foregrounded. This is what makes framing such a durable

propaganda tool: it operates beneath the threshold of verifiable falsehood, making it resistant to conventional fact-checking.

### **2.3 Agenda-Setting**

Agenda-setting theory contributes a complementary insight: that media and political actors influence not so much what people think, as what they think about. By repeatedly foregrounding certain issues, actors, or events while omitting others, media coverage shapes the perceived salience and importance of political topics, which in turn structures public deliberation and electoral judgment. Combined with framing, agenda-setting suggests that propaganda's power lies less in persuading audiences to accept a specific claim and more in narrowing the field of issues and interpretations available for public consideration in the first place.

Taken together, these three frameworks suggest that propaganda should be understood not as a discrete act of lying but as a layered process: structural filtering determines which narratives have the resources and access to circulate widely (the propaganda model); framing determines how those narratives are packaged and interpreted (framing theory); and repetition and prioritization determine which narratives dominate public attention (agenda-setting). The remainder of this paper applies this layered framework to the specific mechanisms of contemporary, and particularly digital, propaganda.

## **3. How Propaganda Constructs and Promotes Political Narratives**

A political narrative, in the sense used here, is a coherent story about who the relevant actors are, what motivates them, what has happened, and what should happen next. Propaganda constructs such narratives not primarily by inventing events but by imposing a particular narrative architecture on events that have genuinely occurred. This architecture typically assigns protagonists and antagonists, establishes a causal chain that assigns responsibility and blame, and offers a resolution that aligns with the interests of the narrative's sponsor.

Three techniques recur across historical and contemporary cases of narrative construction. The first is selective presentation: highlighting facts consistent with the preferred narrative while omitting or minimizing those that complicate it. The second is decontextualization and recontextualization: presenting an event or statement outside its original circumstances so that it

appears to support a different conclusion than it would in context. The third is narrative repetition across multiple, seemingly independent sources, which creates an impression of consensus and corroboration even when the underlying claim originates from a single source or coordinated set of actors. Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) note that this apparent multiplicity of sources — what they describe as the diffusion of a message through many channels — is itself a persuasive device, since audiences tend to treat corroboration across sources as evidence of a claim's independent validity, even when that corroboration is manufactured or coordinated.

Political actors, state institutions, partisan media organizations, and, increasingly, networked publics all participate in this narrative-construction process, but they do not participate as equals. Consistent with the propaganda model's emphasis on structural access, those with greater institutional resources, media access, and organizational capacity are generally better positioned to have their preferred narratives achieve wide circulation and perceived legitimacy (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Mullen & Klaehn, 2010).

#### **4. Framing and Agenda-Setting as Mechanisms of Propaganda Effectiveness**

Framing and agenda-setting do not merely describe how propaganda operates; they explain why it is effective. Because framing shapes the interpretive lens through which audiences process information, two audiences exposed to factually identical events can arrive at substantively different political judgments depending on how those events were framed for them — for instance, as a matter of security versus civil liberties, or as economic necessity versus social injustice. Entman (2007) argues that this capacity to determine "problem definition" is where framing bias exerts its greatest political influence, since the definition of a problem largely predetermines which solutions appear reasonable.

Agenda-setting compounds this effect by determining which frames audiences even encounter. An issue that never achieves media salience cannot be framed for the public at all, regardless of its objective importance; conversely, an issue that is persistently foregrounded — even through predominantly critical coverage — accrues perceived significance simply through the frequency of attention it receives. This dynamic gives political and media actors a second, subtler lever of influence beyond the content of any single frame: the capacity to determine, through repetition and placement, which narratives dominate the public's limited attention. The interaction between

framing and agenda-setting is therefore multiplicative rather than additive — a well-resourced actor who can both set the agenda and control the dominant frame exercises a form of influence considerably greater than either mechanism alone would predict.

## **5. The Digital Transformation of Propaganda**

Digital media has not eliminated the structural dynamics described by the propaganda model, framing theory, and agenda-setting theory; it has multiplied the actors capable of exploiting them and accelerated the speed at which narratives circulate. Three changes are particularly significant.

### **5.1 Disintermediation and Participatory Production**

Traditional propaganda depended on privileged access to broadcast infrastructure controlled by states, political parties, or commercial media conglomerates. Social media platforms disintermediate this process, allowing political leaders, government agencies, partisan organizations, and ordinary citizens to publish directly to mass audiences without editorial gatekeeping. This is often celebrated as democratizing, and in some respects, it is; but it also means that narrative construction is no longer confined to institutional actors accountable to journalistic norms, legal liability, or reputational constraint. Pedro-Carañana et al. (2018) argue that this apparent decentralization coexists with, rather than displaces, the underlying structural filters identified by the propaganda model, since well-resourced actors retain disproportionate capacity to produce, promote, and amplify content even within ostensibly open digital environments.

### **5.2 Algorithmic Curation**

Unlike broadcast media, digital platforms curate content through algorithmic systems optimized primarily for engagement rather than accuracy or public interest. Because emotionally charged, morally polarizing, and identity-affirming content tends to generate higher engagement, algorithmic curation systematically privileges precisely the kind of content most conducive to propaganda's persuasive techniques — emotional appeal, in-group/out-group framing, and repetition through recommendation. This creates a feedback loop in which propaganda

techniques that succeed in generating engagement are algorithmically rewarded with further distribution, independent of any human editorial or political intention to promote them.

### **5.3 Networked Amplification and Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior**

Digital platforms also enable forms of coordinated amplification — through both authentic grassroots sharing and inauthentic coordinated campaigns using automated accounts, coordinated posting, or paid engagement — that can manufacture the appearance of organic consensus around a narrative far more efficiently than pre-digital propaganda techniques allowed. This synthetic corroboration exploits the same psychological tendency, noted by Jowett and O'Donnell (2019), to treat apparent multi-source agreement as evidence of validity, but does so at a scale and speed unavailable to earlier propagandists.

## **6. Emotional Appeals, Repetition, and Selective Information**

Beyond structural and technological factors, propaganda's effectiveness depends on psychological mechanisms operating at the level of the individual audience member. Emotional appeals — particularly those invoking fear, anger, moral outrage, or in-group solidarity — increase both the memorability and the shareability of political content, and they tend to short-circuit the kind of deliberate, analytical evaluation that might otherwise detect inconsistency or bias in a narrative. Repetition, meanwhile, exploits a well-documented cognitive tendency to judge repeated claims as more credible than novel ones, independent of their actual truth value — an effect that operates even when audiences are told, in advance, that a claim is false.

Selective information — the deliberate inclusion of some facts and exclusion of others — remains perhaps the most consequential of these mechanisms precisely because it requires no fabrication. A narrative built entirely from accurate, verifiable facts can nonetheless be deeply misleading if those facts were selected specifically to support a predetermined conclusion while comparably relevant countervailing facts were omitted. Selective exposure — the tendency of audiences to seek out and engage predominantly with information that confirms their existing beliefs — interacts with algorithmic curation to compound this effect, since platforms optimized for engagement will tend to serve audiences more of what they already prefer, reinforcing rather than challenging existing narrative commitments.

## 7. Media and Information Literacy as a Response

If contemporary propaganda operates primarily through selection, framing, repetition, and emotional appeal rather than outright falsehood, then media and information literacy interventions premised solely on fact-checking discrete claims are likely to be insufficient. Effective literacy education must instead equip individuals to recognize framing devices, question the selection and omission of information, identify agenda-setting patterns across a media diet, and critically evaluate the emotional and rhetorical strategies employed in political messaging. This includes cultivating an awareness of one's own platform environment — recognizing that algorithmic curation shapes what any individual is likely to encounter — and deliberately seeking out a plurality of framings and sources on politically consequential issues rather than relying on a single narrative stream, however internally coherent and emotionally resonant that stream may be. Media literacy, in this expanded sense, is not simply a defensive skill for detecting lies; it is an interpretive competency for recognizing how any given account of reality has been constructed, by whom, and toward what end.

## 8. Discussion

The analysis developed here suggests that the conventional distinction between propaganda and legitimate political communication, typically drawn along a truth/falsehood axis, is analytically insufficient for the digital media environment. Much of the political content that most powerfully shapes public perception today consists of accurate individual claims assembled into narratives through selection, framing, and repetition. This does not mean that outright falsehood and misinformation are unimportant; they remain consequential, particularly in the erosion of shared factual baselines necessary for democratic deliberation. But an exclusive focus on falsehood risks overlooking the more pervasive and, in some respects, more durable forms of influence that operate entirely within the bounds of technically accurate reporting.

This reframing has implications for how propaganda should be studied and countered. Research agendas focused narrowly on identifying and debunking false claims should be complemented by analyses of framing patterns, agenda-setting dynamics, and the structural conditions — algorithmic, economic, and institutional — that determine which narratives achieve wide circulation. Likewise, policy responses centered on content moderation and fact-checking should

be complemented by media literacy initiatives, platform design changes that reduce the engagement premium on emotionally polarizing content, and continued scholarly attention to the ownership and institutional structures that the propaganda model identifies as the deep architecture of narrative production.

The framework developed here is not without limitations. The propaganda model has been critiqued for underestimating audience agency and the capacity of counter-narratives to emerge and circulate, particularly in digital environments that also enable marginalized voices and independent journalism to reach audiences directly (Klaehn, 2002). Future research would benefit from empirical work examining how these theoretical mechanisms operate in specific national and platform contexts, including comparative analysis of how framing and agenda-setting patterns differ across political systems, media ownership structures, and platform architectures.

## 9. Conclusion

Contemporary propaganda operates less through the invention of falsehood than through the strategic construction of narrative — via selective presentation, framing, repetition, agenda-setting, and emotional appeal. The propaganda model, framing theory, and agenda-setting theory together offer a layered account of how this construction occurs: structurally, through the differential access of powerful actors to the means of mass communication; discursively, through the selection and packaging of information into interpretive frames; and psychologically, through repetition and emotional resonance that shape what audiences attend to and believe. Digital media has not created these dynamics, but it has multiplied the actors able to exploit them, accelerated their circulation, and introduced algorithmic curation as a powerful new amplifying force. Understanding and responding to propaganda in this environment requires moving beyond the simple binary of truth and falsehood toward a more sophisticated analysis of how information is selected, framed, repeated, and contextualized — and toward media and information literacy practices equipped to make that construction visible to the citizens who are its ultimate audience.

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