[689] Paper

Definitions of strategic political communication

Anders G. Romarheim

Definitions of strategic political communication

Anders G. Romarheim

[**Summary**] Political communication comes in various forms. The first part of this paper presents some variants of political communication, and provides a set of definitions of such communication. A centre of gravity is along the borderline and overlap between rhetoric and propaganda. It is argued here that rhetoric unlike propaganda has a potential for deliberation. Propaganda is inherently hostile towards debate and discussion. This reluctance towards debate and discussion has at times been evident as regards the Bush administration's war on terrorism. The second part of the article deals with propaganda from the Bush administration aimed at quelling debate. All the principals from the first George W. Bush administration (2001-2005) took part in this strategy. Most of the material presented here is explained in more detail in Anders G. Romarheim (2005). *"Crossfire of Fear: Propaganda in the US War on Terrorism"* Hovedoppgave i Statsvitenskap, ISV, UIO.

Definitions of strategic political communication

This article presents definitions of strategic political communication. One centre of gravity for such discussions concerns the borderline – and overlap – between rhetoric and propaganda. *What is propaganda, what is rhetoric, and how should they be defined?* These two variants of communication are in many instances very difficult to separate; there is a grey zone between them. Nevertheless, as Dr. Johnson eloquently pointed out: 'The fact that day shades into night via twilight does not mean that we cannot distinguish between day and night' (quoted in Brown 2004:53).

That 'propaganda' is a disputed and controversial term makes it even more important to work with it, and to strive for greater consensus about its content and core. After the Second World War, propaganda has been largely used in a derogative way in everyday language. This is somewhat undeserved: propaganda can serve good ends as much as bad ends. Propaganda need not be as bad as its current reputation.

Those sceptical to any kind of propaganda should recall that it was widely employed by both sides in the world wars of the 20th century, and it played a crucial role in curbing international Communism during the Cold War. If a nation wants to succeed in war, it would be negligent and precarious not to make use of propaganda. 'War predetermines the use of propaganda' (Page 1996:41).

When a term is plagued by negative connotations and associations, alternative synonyms or euphemisms will normally emerge. We will start out with some observations regarding strategic communication, before moving on to define rhetoric, propaganda and other variants of strategic political communication. In the second part of this article, some of the theoretical tenets will be tested on empirical material – more precisely, the war on terrorism and the war in Iraq. Three communication strategies adopted by the George W. Bush administration will be presented.

It will be argued that the strategies are best defined as propaganda strategies aimed at generating public support for the war on terrorism. The propaganda strategies of the Bush administration sought to establish a link between the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to spread the perception that Iraq possessed

a considerable stock of weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, there was strategic communication designed to choke opposition and terminate any critical discussions about the war on terrorism.

Political communication and persuasion of the masses

Politics is a multifaceted phenomenon that involves a quest for power and influence. It is also a decision-making process that determines the distribution of social goods and establishes laws, rights and prohibitions. This holds true whether decisions are made by an arbitrary dictator or by a representative body of elected delegates. For a better understanding of politics in society, we need to understand communication in its various forms. Politics without communication is like having blood without veins and arteries: it's not really going anywhere.

Aristotle's notion of communication and language has remained a cornerstone of communication theory. Throughout the ages, it has been relentlessly and vigorously attacked from many quarters – without ever disappearing from sight. Figure I presents an example of an Aristotelian model of communication:

Figure I:

Speaker ⟶ Arguments ⟶ Speech ⟶ Audience
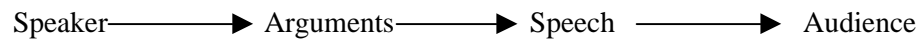
One limitation of this model is that it depicts communication as a one-way process. That is an interesting feature, precisely because propaganda is often described as one-directional communication – but a fruitful definition of communication must include two-way communication as well. A more modern conception of communication derives from George Gerbner: *communication is social interaction through messages* (quoted in McQuail 1994:10). Such an approach is sufficiently broad for the purposes of this article, and includes non-verbal action and inaction as means of communicating something.

Narrowing down the scope from communication in general, to focus instead on mass communication, we find certain mechanisms at work. McQuail (1994:38) has argued that the following features are present in the mass communication process: 'large scale, one-directional flow, asymmetrical, impersonal and anonymous, calculative relationship and standardized content' A communicator who targets a mass

audience does so in a calculative – and potentially manipulative – manner. The mass audience has been defined in communication studies as a passive object of manipulation. 'It [the mass] did not act for itself but was, rather, acted upon' (ibid).

Furthermore, the content of mass communication is considered to be standardized. One main reason for this is that access to mass media, and opportunities for shaping its content, are to a great extent granted only to an elite of professional communicators. Journalists, politicians, media producers and advertisers tend to reproduce procedures and practices, and they follow certain codes of conduct when 'producing' mass communication. This resembles the habitual pattern that characterizes bureaucracies known as 'Standard Operating Procedures' (SOP). A media channel will cultivate its own particular conventions and practices. One reason for establishing a distinct media-channel culture is to make it easily recognizable and thus capable of acquiring loyal audiences.

Mass communication is quite often also persuasive communication. McGuire's information-processing theory, introduced in 1968, provides a lucid presentation of how persuasive communication works. The theory operates with six steps:

1. The persuasive message must be communicated.
2. The receiver will attend to the message.
3. The receiver will comprehend the message.
4. The receiver yields to and is convinced by the arguments presented.
5. The newly adopted position is retained.
6. The desired behaviour takes place.
   (from Severin & Tankard 2001:174).

Only one critical question will be raised to McGuire's theory. Regarding step 4, why is the word 'convinced' used instead of 'persuaded'? Surely, persuasive communication should have persuasion as its goal. 'Convinced' and 'persuaded' are fairly close in meaning, but there is a nuance here that is worthy of recognition. A dictionary definition of the verb 'to convince' is: 'to make someone completely certain about something' (Longmans 1992:280). If one is *persuaded* on the other hand, there may still be an ounce of reluctance or doubt, but despite that, the persuadee succumbs to the pressure of the persuader. A persuaded person may perform externally the same

actions as a convinced person, but his inner sentiments need not be congruent with his observable behaviour.

Now to the effects of mass communication; how does the public relate to political mass communication such as news? It is obvious that commercial news outlets strive to fine-tune their news in accordance with the (presumed) intellectual level of their primary audiences. News that is too difficult – or too simple – for the regular audience to interpret may result in plummeting ratings for news outlets. 'The public will accept news if it is arranged in a comprehensible system' (Ellul 1973:250).

Schema theory examines the processes that lead up to an interpretation of 'new'– or ostensibly new – information, and how this new interpretation is affected by old information in the mind of the individual. The starting point of Graber's *Processing the News* (1993) is that 'Americans are confronted by a seemingly unmanageable flood tide of information' (Graber 1993:1). As a result 'people pay attention to only a small amount of the available information' (Ibid: 2).

Schema theory suggests that the information overload forces the individual to simplify and categorize new information on the basis of already existing knowledge stored in 'schemata'. 'A schemata is a cognitive structure consisting of organized knowledge about situations and individuals that has been abstracted from prior experiences' (Graber 1993:28).

When encountering new political information, the individual will begin a process of decoding the message through comparison with pre-existing schemata, until one is found that matches fairly well. Having found such a schemata, the individual transfers some of the knowledge of the already existing schemata onto the new information. As a result, little is learned that is actually new – even when the individual encounters distinctly new scenarios and political information.

This has at least two implications for political communicators, propagandists and journalists. Firstly, they must try to present new political information in a format and with a structure already somewhat familiar to the audience. Secondly, it will be rational to simplify the political mass communication, so as to ensure that the most important information gets through to the audience. If the communicator does not simplify the information, then the individual probably will – and then there is no knowing what will be understood and remembered. Telling the full story may in fact confuse and distract the audience away from the most important parts of the argument or information.

Propaganda and rhetoric defined

The term 'propaganda' originates from a papal attempt to contain the spread of Protestantism and to propagate the Roman Catholic faith: the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide,* established by Pope Gregory XV in 1622. The word is derived from the Latin verb 'propagare', which means to spread and propagate. For our purposes, we may define propaganda as follows, primarily based on Jowett & O'Donnell (1999:6) and Ellul (1973:61):

> Propaganda is systematic strategic mass communication conveyed by an organization to shape perceptions and manipulate the cognitions of a specific audience. Its ultimate goal is to direct the audience's behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the political objectives of the propaganda organization.

One clarification: In propaganda, as here defined, there is no invitation to dialogue. '[Propaganda] does not tolerate discussion; by its very nature, it excludes contradiction and discussion' (Ellul 1973:11). In this respect propaganda differs from *rhetoric* – again, as defined here. The normative definition of rhetoric suggested here consists of Aristotle's (1941:1329) centuries-old definition, supplemented with Jowett & O'Donnell's (1999:28) contemporary approach to persuasion:

> Rhetoric is the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion, persuasion being potentially – and ideally – the outcome of an interactive communicative process.

In rhetoric – when it is defined as a potentially deliberative two-way process – relevant and sincere argumentation will play a central role. Participants may expect that principles of relevance and veracity will be respected (Andersson & Furberg 1973:33). This may also be true of instances of propaganda. For the propagandist, however, the choice of instruments for influencing his target is entirely a question of strategy: the propagandist is not interested in an interactive process involving mutual influence.

Theory that aims to separate propaganda from other forms of communication tends to focus on one of these three criteria: content, technique or asymmetry of interests.

Firstly, scholars like Leonard Doob (1948) have suggested that the nature of the *content* of communication determines whether we are dealing with propaganda or not. Such definitions focus on questions of information/disinformation and objective truths, half-truths or deliberate lies. Such content-based definitions rest on the presupposition that there exists an objective truth regarding most phenomena. One should not dismiss the notion of an objective reality, but it is a difficult concept to work with. 'In our time "meaning" and "truth" join "reality" as problematic and relative terms' (Gardner 1980:806).

Secondly, definitions that focus on technique typically state that propaganda has more to do with *how* things are communicated than with the substantial content of *what* is communicated. Propaganda should be understood as a means: it can be applied towards ends that may be immoral or moral. 'Propaganda as a mere tool is no more moral or immoral than a pump handle' (Lasswell 1995:21).

Thirdly, there is the criterion of asymmetry of interest between persuader and persuadee. It is sometimes claimed that we are dealing with propaganda if the desired ends of the persuader 'will be advantageous to the persuader but not in the best interest of the persuadee' (Brown 1958:300). In fact, this approach is problematic, as it may be difficult to determine what will be in the best interest of the persuadee. Take an example, where we assume that govermental "information campaigns" is indeed propaganda aimed at directing behaviour. Many people enjoy smoking and do not wish to quit, even though they know it seriously damages their health. Governmental anti-smoking propaganda campaigns aim at an outcome that is 'in the best interest' of the smoker, the government and society at large.

This study prefers to see propaganda primarily as a *technique*. It is hard to determine whether someone may benefit from being exposed to propaganda or not. Furthermore, propaganda need not be untrue. To reduce the definition of propaganda to primarily a question of content is therefore insufficient, and may ultimately lead to a useless definition of propaganda defined as the opposite of proven facts and truth.

The definition of propaganda put forward here is basically an attempt at splicing two influential definitions in the academic literature on propaganda. Let us start by examining Jowett & O'Donnell's definition more closely:

> Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.
> (Jowett & O'Donnell 1999:6)

This technique-oriented definition is a useful analytical tool. The wording is precise, and largely neutral as to questions of morality and content. The first two terms of the definition represent important criteria in defining propaganda. It is often taken as implicit, but should be stated explicitly, that propaganda is systematic and deliberate. This deliberate aspect acknowledges propagandists as instrumental and intentional actors.

Furthermore, Jowett & O'Donnell encapsulate much of propaganda activities with the wording 'shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions'. These processes form the core of their definition. 'Shape' refers to a milder form of propaganda, whereas 'manipulate' generally has more negative connotations. The crucial point for the propagandist is to disseminate certain cognitions and perceptions in order to produce behaviour that the propagandist considers desirable.

Passive behaviour is also a possible goal: the desired behaviour towards which propaganda works may be inaction, implicitly supporting and maintaining the status quo. It is important to note that Jowett & O'Donnell do not exclude the possibility that the desired behaviour may from time to time be beneficial for the propagandee as well. Asymmetry of interests between propagandist and propagandee is very common, but should not serve as a definitional criterion

The minor problems involved in Jowett & O'Donnell's definition stem largely from what is *not* included. It could be argued that the definition is too wide and should include additional criteria to decrease the population found in the *propaganda universe*. One definition that can remedy some of the shortcomings is that provided by Jacques Ellul (1973: 61):

> Propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization.

The word 'method' is used in this definition, indicating that Ellul is also placed within the branch of propaganda theory that views propaganda as a technique. Additionally, the notion of propaganda as a mass phenomenon is conspicuous here. According to Ellul, propaganda is initiated by an organized group and is directed at a mass of individuals. The aim of propaganda is to agitate and inspire people to action and to incorporate them in an organization.

According to Ellul, 'total propaganda' must be exercised. All available media must be applied to reach the full range of individuals in the target group. He further argues that propaganda furnishes the individual with a complete system for explaining the world (Ellul 1973: 11), and stresses the importance of centralized control over the media for propaganda to be effective (ibid: 102). This last assumption has now become obsolete.

'Only action is of concern to modern propaganda' (Ellul 1973:25). In this he underestimates the passive and sedating effect that propaganda may have. Manipulating cognitions may be an effective way for a state to prevent undesirable actions like riots or demonstrations, not to mention the ultimate and existential threat: coups that can topple the propaganda organization. Here it seems more precise to use the word 'behaviour' rather than 'action'.

Ellul presents one more idea that deserves mention: the concept of propaganda as a substitute for a leader. 'It means that in a group without a leader, but subjected to propaganda, the sociological and psychological effects are the same as if there were a leader' (Ellul 1973: 211). If we relate this idea to the current frontrunner in the world of international terrorism, the pieces fall into place. Al Qaeda cells sometimes operate as if there were a leader present, even though they have never met Bin Laden or any of his closest lieutenants. That such groups may still be inspired and directed by al Qaeda's propaganda also points up an essential truth: that an integral part of defeating international terrorism consists in conducting a propaganda campaign capable of refuting the propaganda issued by the spiritual and ideological leaders of terrorist groups.

Propaganda: comparative aspect

> Words frequently used as synonyms for propaganda are lies, distortion, deceit,
> manipulation, mind control, psychological warfare, brainwashing and palaver
> (Jowett & O'Donnell 1999:3).

Contrasting propaganda to other terms may increase our understanding of it. In the following, propaganda will be seen in relation to words like information, education, spin, and the concept of public diplomacy. Advertising will not be given much attention here, since propaganda, as the term is defined here, is not about selling products. Unlike propaganda, advertising has economic ends (Ellul 1973:62). Political propaganda has an inherent capacity to engage beyond trivial consumerism: it is in fact about life and death (Taithe & Thornton 1999:15).

Jowett & O'Donnell (1999:12) describe propaganda as 'white, grey or black, in relationship to an acknowledgment of its source and its accuracy of information.' These two variables for making a typology have been in use for some time now; also Ellul (1973:15) discusses them, with emphasis on covert and overt propaganda.

'White' propaganda comes from a source that is identified correctly, and the information in the message tends to be factually accurate. Nevertheless, white propaganda messages are characterized by biased 'reasoning', and are often aimed at improving the credibility of the source. Such credibility can be used at a later stage when influencing and manipulating may be more important than when the white propaganda message was conveyed. It is white propaganda that overlaps the most with related terms such as public diplomacy, information, rhetoric and persuasion.

'Black' propaganda applies stealth and is credited to a false source. It spreads lies and fabrications. Black propagandists have no concern for the truth: deception is actively sought. Moreover, black propagandists will not hesitate to apply any techniques to achieve persuasion. Bjørgo & Heradstveit (1996:12) have labelled propaganda as 'persuasion by all – and any – means'. This description is particularly apt for black propaganda.

'Grey' propaganda is placed in the middle of an imagined continuum between black and white propaganda. The correctness of the information and the identity of the source may be known

or unknown. Logically, propaganda will never be 'black' if its original source can be determined, and if that source acknowledges its involvement. No matter how manipulative or deceptive a statement is, it should be classified as *grey* if the source can be correctly identified. Similarly, a message may be veracious and accurate, but nevertheless grey, because the source is unknown.

Educative processes resemble propagandistic processes to some extent. Ellul (1973: xiii) considers propaganda to be 'semi-educative' or 're-education'. Propaganda can be used to break down or disable prior learning. Some white propaganda may overlap with what is normally defined as education – i.e. 'the process by which a person's mind and character are developed through teaching' (Longmans 1992: 407). One important distinction between education and propaganda is explained in the following statement: 'Education teaches us how to think in order to enable us to make up our own minds, propaganda dictates what one should think' (Cull et al. 2003: xix). When one dictates what others should think – and consequently also how others should behave – there is little genuine education involved. It has more to do with mind-control to 'manufacture' conformity and obedience.

Another interesting word pair is 'information' and 'disinformation'. Ellul (1973: 112) claims that it is impossible to distinguish clearly between propaganda and information. Jowett and O'Donnell (1999:18), however, point to the close links between disinformation and propaganda. 'Heavily biased selective information' will often be a fitting description of the content of propaganda. Deliberate disinformation is the propaganda that is easiest to categorize as such.

Propaganda often involves exploiting the conventions of rhetoric. It has been argued that: 'The honest rhetorician has no separate name to distinguish him from the dishonest' (Aristotle 1941: 1318). Here, rhetoric has been defined as 'the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion, persuasion being potentially – and ideally – the outcome of an interactive communicative process.'

Rhetoric represents an opportunity for deliberation, and a common understanding of a phenomenon is often sought. In what constitutes a genuine discussion, all participants must be willing to adjust their line of action, if convincing counterarguments to their initial position are presented (Midgaard et al. 1973: 98–105). In this respect, persuasion and

propaganda differ, since the propagandist seeks to direct behaviour, irrespective of any counterarguments.

Rhetoric should be defined so that it excludes dogmatism. Dogmatism is about 'holding one's beliefs very strongly and expecting other people to accept them without question' (Longmans 1992: 375). A constituting condition for listening to another person's arguments is that the person will listen to – and give real consideration to – any counterarguments or alternative perspectives one might present. The notion of communicative rationality and the idea that speakers will yield to the force of better arguments relates to this aspect of rhetoric (Habermas 1984: 25). If this convention – or implicit agreement – is not adhered to, then there can be no real debate. If this condition is not met, rhetoric – or any form of two-way communication – is dysfunctional. It may degenerate into a series of non-related monologues, as indeed occasionally happens in partisan political debates.

In contemporary society, the term 'rhetoric' often has negative connotations not necessarily implied by its original meaning (derived from the Greek for 'orator' and related to a term meaning 'a word'). As noted by Taithe & Thorton (1993: 3), many people have lost sight of 'the real purpose of rhetoric, which is to convince and persuade, in effect to end disputes and iron out dissent through reasoned argument'. Propaganda, by contrast, typically seeks to eliminate dissent *without* discussion.

An important distinction between the rhetorician and the propagandist is that the latter does not need to espouse the views or perceptions he disseminates to the audience: indeed, he may be fully aware that they are false. 'He must, of course, believe in the *cause* he serves, but not in his particular argument' (Ellul 1973: 24). What is of real importance to the propagandist is that it is in his interest if the perception in question is accepted by the propagandee. Daniel Lerner has argued, 'Propagandists do not decide to tell the truth because they personally are honest, any more than they decide to tell lies because they are dishonest' (quoted in Taylor 1997:158). Their choice of wording, debating-techniques and arguments is entirely a question of strategy.

Euphemisms for propaganda

The credibility of the speaker and the audience's attitude towards the message are influenced negatively if a message is categorized as propaganda, so most people are averse to being branded as propagandists. Consequently, more desirable labels are constructed by those who in fact produce propaganda. It is normally very poor propaganda if the source itself acknowledges that it is in fact disseminating propaganda.

In recent decades, 'spin' has become a common term in civil society, especially in politics. Spin involves manipulation of political information and is frequently applied by political figures and parties. Spin has to do with 'selling' politics. It operates in the grey zone between rhetoric and propaganda, and is widely accepted as a tool that all 'image-builders' must apply. Jowett & O'Donnell (1999:3) define spin as follows:

> Spin is a coordinated strategy to minimize negative information and present in a favourable light a story that is damaging.

The term 'spin doctor' refers to communication experts and advisors who specialize in 'spinning' information about their clients. The intrusion of public relations into politics means that governing now includes conducting a *permanent campaign* (Blumenthal 1980:7). The logic and intensity of election campaigns and offensive marketing has made perception management compulsory for politicians. Here Blumenthal's words should be borne in mind: 'Perceptions are not unreal simply because they are manufactured' (ibid: 5). To the perceiver, perceptions that are untrue are just as real as true ones. Perception management is, for all practical purposes, politics for real.

A government also needs to take care of its image abroad. Public diplomacy (PD) is, broadly speaking, 'the task of communicating with overseas publics' (Leonard 2002:48). Leonard, who has done extensive research on PD, argues: 'Public diplomacy is not simply delivering a message to an audience; it is about getting a result' (ibid: 52). This suggests that PD, much like propaganda, is instrumental and strategic, and that the communication works systematically towards a specified goal set prior to the communication process.

The label PD is thought to have evolved in the circles around the public diplomacy centre of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, established in 1965. Manheim (1994: 3–4) distinguishes PD from other forms of diplomacy. PD concerns government-to-people contacts, and these are different from the more traditional government-to-government, diplomat-to-diplomat and people-to-people contacts. Manheim (1994: 5) offers a fruitful definition of PD:

> Public Diplomacy is a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies.

Although most PD can be labelled as white propaganda, there are elements that distinguish it from propaganda. The most striking example is the call for 'developing lasting relationships with key individuals through scholarships, exchanges, training, seminars, conferences, and access to media channels' (Leonard 2002: 51). The Fulbright exchange programme is a good example of PD that is not propaganda as such. It is fair to acknowledge that such ties between opinion leaders and government officials can cut both ways. Propaganda is applied to direct behaviour, so when there is real doubt as to who is directing whose behaviour, we are not dealing with propaganda as defined here. It should be noted that PD sometimes truly works towards fostering shared views and common understanding.

The communication situation of PD often differs from that of propaganda. Propaganda is here understood as one-way, push-down mass communication. Whereas propaganda does not encourage discussion, public diplomacy is not a one-way street (Cull et al. 2003:327). One way of viewing PD is to relate it to Joseph Nye's idea of *soft power*: 'Soft Power is the ability to achieve desired outcomes in international affairs through attraction rather than coercion' (Nye 1996:21). If states can achieve their goals through public diplomacy rather than through coercion, this will be an instance of exercising soft power. Such avoidance of disruptive confrontations recalls the military dogma observed by Sun Tzu in the 5th century BC: 'Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting' (Sun Tzu 1963:48).

Figure II illustrates the relationship between public diplomacy and white, grey and black propaganda:

Figure II:
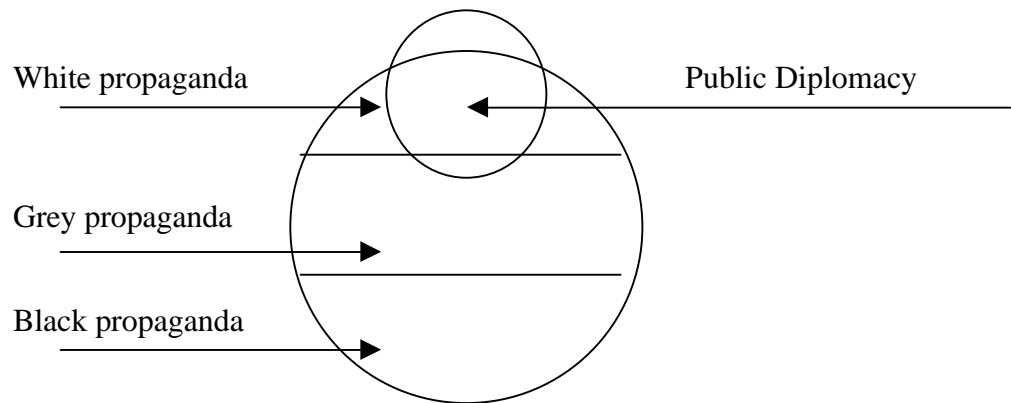
From Figure II we see that PD and propaganda overlap, but that there are also elements of PD that are not propaganda. Moreover, almost all PD that can also be defined as propaganda belongs in the category of white propaganda, and never in the category of black propaganda.

Propaganda in the war on terrorism

Having established a definition of propaganda, and indicated some major differences between propaganda and its synonyms and euphemisms, let us look at some empirical examples from international politics where these definitions and distinctions matter. The war on terrorism is taking place at the centre stage of international politics, with ramifications to practically all other fields of international politics. After the events of 9/11, propaganda became a major feature of the 'war on terrorism' (Cull et al. 2003: xx).

Once an actor has decided to launch a propaganda campaign, a propaganda strategy is required. A 'strategy' is here understood as a plan for achieving a certain goal. A propaganda strategy will have certain linguistic or argumentative characteristics, and will tend to rely on one or more propaganda devices – sub-units that make up propaganda strategies. A propaganda device is defined as an argument structure – or style – that exceeds the limits of rhetoric.

The approach chosen here is quote-based. One must be able to demonstrate that something is propaganda by pointing out credible textual evidence for such a claim: it is not sufficient merely to say that this speech or that paragraph is of a propagandistic nature. Three empirical examples of propaganda strategies will be presented below. These three strategies were designed to direct people's behaviour, because they were all adopted in order to generate public support for the war on terrorism. The first strategy intended to quell any debate about the war on terrorism. The second tried to spread the perception that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) The third was an attempt to link together the first phase (Afghanistan) with the second phase (Iraq) of the war on terrorism.

Quelling discussion in the war on terrorism

With one quote from each of the Bush administration's (2001–05) five top members it will be suggested that propaganda – and not rhetoric – is the correct categorization for considerable parts of the Bush administration's strategic communication. The five quotes from the war on terrorism also illustrate the second propaganda strategy examined in this article, which deals with unfounded certainty about Iraqi possession of WMD.

Let us start off with an assessment of the context in which the five quotes appeared. George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, and John Ashcroft are key principals in an administration that was attacked on 11 September 2001. They perceive themselves to be at war with al Qaeda and international terrorism. We should recall that under such circumstances the use of propaganda is quite conventional.

Quote 1 is Ashcroft in December 2001, a period when the Bush administration could go far in forcefully choking dissident voices. Opposition to the administration's policies was almost to non-existent in mainstream media outlets. Quotes 2 (Cheney) and 3 (Rumsfeld) are from the autumn of 2002. At that point the Bush administration had made the case for opening a new front in the war on terrorism in Iraq. Quote 4 is from Colin Powell's speech on Iraq's possession of WMD to the UN Security Council, February 2003 – a speech he would later describe as a blot on his professional record. Finally, quote 5 is from President Bush's 'ultimatum speech' on 17 March 2003, in which he gave Saddam Hussein 48 hours to leave Iraq. And indeed, the

bombing campaign of Iraq started on 19 March. The five quotes appear in chronological order below.

1. To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty; my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists – for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve. They give ammunition to America's enemies (Ashcroft, 6 December 2001).

2. Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us (Cheney, 26 August 2002).

3. There's no debate in the world as to whether they have those weapons. There's no debate in the world as to whether they're continuing to develop and acquire them [...] We all know that. A trained ape knows that. All you have to do is read the newspaper. (Rumsfeld, 13 September 2002).

4. There can be no doubt that Saddam Hussein has biological weapons and the capability to rapidly produce more, many more. [...] We know that Saddam Hussein is determined to keep his weapons of mass destruction; he's determined to make more (Powell, 5 February 2003).

5. Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised. (Bush, 17 March 2003)

Quote 1 differs slightly from the others. It is an example of the kind of condemnation and verbal attacks heaped on those who criticized the Bush administration in 2001. Such blatant discussion-termination was not sustainable for very long. Dissident voices ultimately came to the surface, and the aura of ostensible political conformity following 9/11 could not last. Some four years later, sentiment in the USA was completely different when hurricane Katrina ravaged Louisiana:

The critical difference between the hurricane and the Sept. 11 attacks: Democrats appear to be able to question the administration's competence without opening themselves to attacks on their patriotism (Nagourney & Hulse 2005).

When ethnocentric patriotism bordering on nationalism is on the rise, critical thinking, diversity and genuine freedom of expression are often eclipsed. The shocking events of 9/11 led Americans into government-true obedience. The momentum and leverage that this loyal attitude gave the Bush administration was

solidified through propaganda strategies. As notions of national unity and patriotism diminished, so did the Bush administration's room for manoeuvre.

A core feature of all five statements is that they are designed to terminate discussion – note the phrase 'no doubt', employed by Bush, Powell and Cheney. As the story unfolded, there were in fact substantial grounds for having doubts about the assessments of WMD in Iraq. Nevertheless, the Bush administration sought to dismiss any such claims by short-circuiting the debate. Rumsfeld went so far as to claim that there was not even any debate about these matters, even indicating that those who differed with him were below the level of trained apes.

Rumsfeld later claimed that he knew where the WMD were stored: 'We know where they are. They're in the area around Tikrit and Baghdad and east, west, south and north somewhat' (Rumsfeld, 30 March 2003). That statement was a plain lie. The fact that the information presented in quotes was incorrect, misleading and false leads to the conclusion that they properly belong to the category grey propaganda as defined above.

At times it seemed that the Bush administration was trying to generate support for a war to disarm Iraq in any way possible. In that process they adopted a classic propaganda device called 'the fallacy of impossible certainty'. This involves 'stating as fact what cannot possibly be known to be true' (Sandor 2001:135). Did the Bush administration deliberately mislead and lie? Not necessarily, and at least not all the time. What its members did do was to express unfounded certainty about the existence of WMD in Iraq. They did not know, but still claimed they knew.

These two propaganda strategies proved quite effective on Americans and the US mass media. The highly reputed *Washington Post* completely accepted the perception that Iraq had WMD, and echoed the Bush administration's call for war in an editorial titled 'Irrefutable', printed the day after Powell's UN presentation. The impact of the discussion termination is obvious, since the *Washington Post* wrote: 'it is hard to imagine how anyone could doubt that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction' (Solomon 2005:46). It was a telling example of honest journalism – and effective strategic communication – when *Washington Post* journalist Mary McGrory the same day confessed about Powell's speech: 'He persuaded me' (ibid).

From Afghanistan to Iraq

The five statements presented above date from different phases of the war on terrorism. An important propaganda strategy in the war on terrorism aimed to link these different phases together. For such purposes, the propaganda device called *transfer* is particularly useful. It involves transferring the attributions and/or connotations of one phenomenon onto another phenomenon. To qualify as propaganda, the link established must be of a dubious kind. This dubious connection can be established to promote both benign and atrocious purposes.

The application of transfer was crucial in placing the war in Iraq firmly under the heading of war on terrorism. 'Simply by mentioning Iraq and Al Qaeda together in the same sentence, over and over, the message got through' (Rampton & Stauber 2003:96). Here are some statements that contributed to this comprehensive *transfer* by linking together al-Qaeda, Saddam Hussein and Iraq:

> He [Saddam] is a threat because he is dealing with al Qaeda. (Bush, 7 November 2002)

> We know that he [Saddam] has a long-standing relationship with various terrorist groups, including the al-Qaeda organization. (Cheney, 16 March 2003)

> [Iraq] has aided, trained and harbored terrorists, including operatives of al Qaeda. (Bush, 17 March 2003)

> As we fight the war on terror in Iraq and on other fronts... (Bush, 2 June 2004)

The Bush administration tried to 'contaminate' Iraq with the established negative representations of al Qaeda and the Taliban. 'The aim was not to prove an assertion but to conflate Iraq with al Qaeda any way possible' (Corn 2003: 218). Table 1 shows the entities involved in the quite transfer applied:

Table 1:

First phase ──────────────▶	Second phase
War on terrorism	War in Iraq
Osama bin Laden	Saddam Hussein
Afghanistan	Iraq
Taliban	Baath Party
al Qaeda, terrorism	Iraq as a terrorizing state
Response to attack	Pre-emptive (preventive) warfare

The propaganda of the initial stages of the war on terrorism had successfully singled out everything in the left column as legitimate targets or courses of action. There had been only minor criticism, within the USA and abroad, of the war in Afghanistan. It was imperative for the Bush administration that the new adversary should receive a similar status, so repetitive use of transfers was a natural choice of propaganda device. This approach is very much in accordance with the tenets of schema theory. Selling the war in Iraq could be facilitated by the existing schemata represented by the left-hand column of Table 1.

The attempt to link these separate phenomena was systematic, yet only partly successful. Many people, especially outside the USA, started to question whether Iraq was in fact a part of the war on terrorism. Was there really any terrorism to worry about from Iraq? Former 'terrorism Czar' Richard Clarke (2004a:231) provides a pre-9/11 quote from deputy CIA Director McLaughlin: 'We have no evidence of any active Iraqi terrorist threat against the US.' Clarke also detected the transfer going on while it was still highly operative. In an Op-ed titled 'The Wrong Debate on Terrorism' in the *New York Times* he effectively dismantled the transfer by a careful choice of words: 'The war on terrorism and the separate war in Iraq' (Clarke 2004b)

Conclusions

We have compared and contrasted different variants of strategic political communication to propaganda. The definition of propaganda used here has emphasized that propaganda, unlike rhetoric, is by nature hostile to discussion. A propagandist has no interest in adjusting his views or suggested actions to accommodate the views and needs of others. By contrast, rhetoric has the potential for such deliberative exchanges – but this is a potential. Rhetoric need not always have such dimensions, and rhetoric and propaganda overlap to some extent.

Propaganda is best understood as a technique, but it is most easily recognizable when its content represents deception or disinformation. Between propagandist and propagandee there is most often an asymmetry of interest, but this aspect should be kept out of a definition of propaganda.

Specifying that propaganda is a form of mass communication is more fruitful as an academic approach.

Communication is here defined as social interaction through messages, and politics without communication is unthinkable. Consequently, heavy reliance on communication experts and spin-doctors is unavoidable for politicians. This is all part of what has become *the permanent campaign* of governing.

Propaganda is a diverse phenomenon, which may well admit of further categorization and specification. A typology that distinguishes between white, grey and black propaganda is one way of doing that. Relating those categories to public diplomacy, we see that the similarities between public diplomacy and white propaganda are great. However, it would be imprecise to brand all PD as propaganda, as it is not necessarily a one-way, push-down form of mass communication (Peterson 2002:81).

Key members of the Bush administration sought to generate support for the war in Iraq through quashing debates about it. They spread the perception that Iraq possessed WMD. They expressed unfounded certainty on the WMD-issue. This propaganda strategy backfired on the administration when their bluff – rather than a large stock of WMD – was exposed in Iraq.

Transfer was the primary propaganda device employed for linking together different phases of the war on terrorism. Attempts were made to capitalize on the substantial public support for the war in Afghanistan in order to generate support for war against Iraq. However, the links between the two wars were not as obvious as the Bush administration claimed. Judith Yaphe, a CIA analyst for 20 years, put it aptly: 'You're left to just hear the nouns, and put them together' (Corn 2003:234).

In the early stages, it was very hard to voice opposition to the war on terrorism. Then, as the costly war in Iraq unfolded, and the administration's propaganda strategies were increasingly exposed, critical voices gained momentum in the United States. By November 2005 also Dick Cheney had to acknowledge that there was indeed debate about important aspects of the war on terrorism. Whether his comments are a necessary rhetorical manoeuvre forced by pressure and criticism, or an indication of a more deliberative stance on attitudes to the war on terrorism remains unknown. Cheney's recent talk at the think-tank American Enterprise Institute does, however, represent a shift in the strategic communication of the Bush administration:

> I do not believe it is wrong to criticize the war on terror or any aspect thereof. Disagreement, argument, and debate are the essence of democracy, and none of us should want it any other way (Cheney, 21 November 2005).

Bibliography

Andersson, Jan & Mats Furberg (1973): *Politik och propaganda. Om röstvärrandets semantik.* Stockholm: Aldus Bonniers.

Aristotle (1941): *The Basic Works of Aristotle,* ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House.

Bjørgo, Tore & Daniel Heradstveit (1996): *Politisk kommunikasjon,* 2nd ed. Oslo: Tano.

Blumenthal, Sidney (1980): *The Permanent Campaign: Inside the World of Elite Political Operatives.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Brown, Chris (2004): 'Reflections on the "War on Terror"', *International Politics*, 41 (1): 51–64.

Brown, Roger (1958): *Words and Things*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.

Clarke, Richard (2004a): *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror.* New York: Free Press.

Clarke, Richard (2004b): 'The Wrong Debate on Terrorism', *The New York Times*, 25 April.

Corn, David (2003): *The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception.* New York: Crown.

Cull, Nicolas J.; David Culbert & David Welch (eds) (2003): *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*, Oxford: ABC Clio.

Doob, Leonard W. (1948): *Public Opinion and Propaganda*. New York: Henry Holt.

Ellul, Jacques (1973): *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes.* New York: Vintage Books.

Gardner, Helen (1980): *Gardner's Art through the Ages,* 7th ed. Revised by Richard G. Tansey & Horst de la Croix. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Graber, Doris A. (1993): *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide,* 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Habermas, Jürgen (1984): *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Jowett, Garth S. & Victoria O'Donnell (1999): *Propaganda and Persuasion,* 3rd ed. London: SAGE.

Lasswell, Harold D. (1995): 'Propaganda', in Robert Jackall (ed.), *Propaganda (Main Trends of the Modern World).* Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillans.

Leonard, Mark (2002): 'Diplomacy by Other Means', *Foreign Policy*. September/October, No. 132: 48–56.

Longmans (1992): *Dictionary of English Language and Culture.* Harlow: Longman Group.

Manheim, Jarol B. (1994): *Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy: The Evolution of Influence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

McQuail, Dennis (1994): *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction,* 3rd ed. London: SAGE.

Midgaard, Knut; Halvor Stenstadvold & Arild Underdal (1973): 'An Approach to Political Interlocutions', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 8: 9–36.

Nagourney, Adam & Carl Hulse (2005): 'Democrats Step Up Criticism of White House', *The New York Times*, 8 September.

Nye, Joseph S., Jr. & William A. Owens (1996): 'America's Information Edge', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, 75 (2): 20–36.

Page, Caroline (1996): *U.S. Official Propaganda during the Vietnam War, 1965 – 1973: The Limits of Persuasion.* London: Leicester University Press.

Peterson, Peter G. (2002): 'Public Diplomacy and the War on Terrorism', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October, 81 (5): 74–94.

Rampton, Sheldon & John Stauber (2003): *Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq.* London: Robinson.

Sandor, Abby (2001): 'Participatory Propaganda in the Gulf War', in J. Shanahan (ed.), *Propaganda without Propagandists? Six Case Studies in U.S. Propaganda.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Severin, Werner J. & James W. Tankard, Jr. (2001): *Communication Theories*, 5th ed. New York: Longman.

Solomon, Norman (2005): *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Sun Tzu (1963): '*The Art of War*', transl. Samuel B. Griffith, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Taithe, Bertrand & Tim Thornton (eds) (1999): *Propaganda: Political Rhetoric and Identity, 1300–2000* . Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publ.

Taylor, Phillip M. (1997): *Global Communications, International Affairs and the Media since 1945*. London: Routledge.