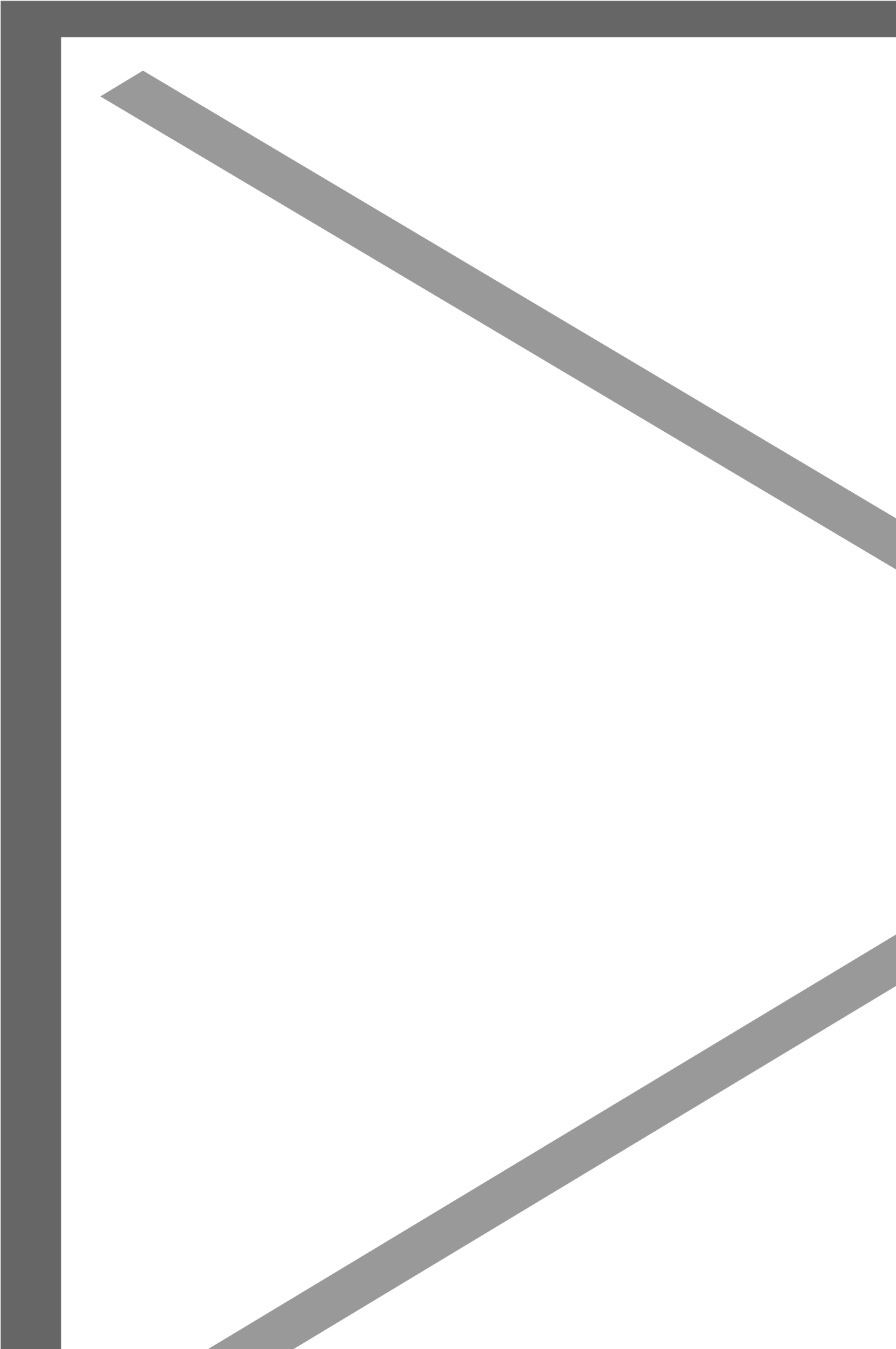


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The Propaganda Apocalypse ^[1]

Seeing Red: Russian Propaganda and American News

Sarah Oates and Gordon Neil Ramsay, Oxford University Press, 2024, \$21.15/paperback, hardcover available, 216 pages.

How to Win an Information War: The Propagandist who Outwitted Hitler

Peter Pomerantsev, Public Affairs, 2024, \$29.59/paperback, hardcover, e-book available, 304 pages.

Propaganda and Persuasion

Nancy Snow, Sage Publications, 2024, \$128/paperback, e-book available, 512 pages.

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Propaganda and its threat to democratic institutions in the digital age has emerged as a central problem of our time. Concern about the consequences of targeted information manipulation and influence operations now dominates contemporary political discourse. In fact, we can't stop talking about it. Nearly a decade after RAND's landmark study of the Russian "firehose of propaganda" model, the firehose of alarmist commentary on propaganda, disinformation, and fake news has all but overwhelmed attempts to make sense of their effects.

Fortunately, three new books drawing from a range of scholarly disciplines offer balanced, detailed, and accessible analyses of the nature of propaganda and how to confront it. In *Seeing Red: Russian Propaganda and American News*, coauthors Sarah Oates and Gordon Neil Ramsay offer a groundbreaking analysis of how and why Russian disinformation has penetrated American media and political discourse in the last decade. Using an innovative diagnostic model, the authors also reveal the extent to which Russian disinformation and propaganda, amplified by domestic actors, have "colonized," weakened, and compromised U.S. media outlets.

Oates and Ramsay provide an especially insightful analysis of the erosion of traditional media institutions in the digital age, and how the transformation of the information ecosystem has increased our vulnerability to propaganda. They identify the extent to which the unregulated social media environment, algorithm-dominated news distribution models, and the demise of traditional commercial funding mechanisms have each undermined the production of high-quality journalism in the public interest. They then provide ample evidence that the "strong tradition of free speech" has itself become "susceptible to manipulation" in this decentralized and fragmented information space.

Seeing Red also provides an essential primer on the spread of foreign propaganda in American political discourse. Using a set of analytical tools designed to track the presence of

Russian-based narratives in U.S. news, Oates and Ramsay demonstrate that Russian and far right domestic narratives use the same key words and phrases to undermine the credibility of American political institutions.

Because these narratives essentially sound and feel alike, it is difficult to distinguish between them—or recognize who is behind them. By demonstrating how these narratives influence and reinforce one another, the authors show how Russian propaganda has not only penetrated the U.S. media ecosystem but reverberates in the anti-democratic discourse of the far right.

As Oates and Ramsay write, *Seeing Red* is a “how dunnit” rather than a “who dunnit.” Instead of merely focusing on identifying and exposing specific propaganda outlets or actors, this book offers an evidence-based analytical framework to track how propaganda moves across the media landscape. The “scourge” of propaganda cannot be eliminated; but, as Oates and Ramsay show us, a clear-eyed assessment of its attributes can go a long way in building resistance to its effects.

Evidence-based analysis is one way to combat disinformation effects. Historical example is another. In *How to Win an Information War: The Propagandist Who Outwitted Hitler*, prominent disinformation expert Peter Pomerantsev tells the story of Sefton Delmer, the head of Special Operations for the British Political Warfare Executive during World War II, whose unorthodox countermeasures undermined the propaganda of the Third Reich. A stylish blend of history, biography, memoir, and sociology, *How to Win an Information War* is, like its hero, a bit subversive and altogether compelling.

Drawing on the philosopher Jacques Ellul’s insight that “propaganda is the true remedy for loneliness,” Pomerantsev argues that the real power of propaganda is not to “convince” or “confuse” (as most contemporary definitions have it) but rather to “provide a sense of belonging” in an unstable world. He then shows how Delmer subverted Nazi ideology by drawing attention to its failure to make good on its promise of a common purpose and shared identity.

The heart of the book is Pomerantsev’s deft retelling of Delmer’s crowning achievement, the persona of “der Chef,” a fictional renegade Wehrmacht officer whose “secret” radio broadcasts from the British countryside were aimed at weary and demoralized German soldiers and civilians. By routinely (and profanely) calling attention to inconsistencies in Nazi ideology and the behavior of its leadership, der Chef credibly undermined both.

Pomerantsev cites Delmer’s ability to tap into and build on his audience’s resentment and alienation, finding innovative and unexpected ways to subvert Nazi propaganda. By magnifying the distortions and inequities embedded in the regime’s rhetoric, he created an exploitable gap between the German people and its Nazi leadership. Pomerantsev urges contemporary information warriors to do the same, that is, to find new and different ways to assess, engage, and motivate vulnerable audiences.

At the same time, reflecting on contemporary Russian propaganda campaigns, Pomerantsev waxes pessimistic about our ability to create a communication environment where democracy can function. In his telling, online algorithms encourage people to seek association with like-minded believers who prioritize their deepest fears and offer a shared sense of purpose. The penetration and subversion of these closed communities of belief remains elusive.

"By highlighting the vulnerability to disinformation created by the collapse of traditional media systems, the siren call of “belonging” at the heart of most influence campaigns, and propaganda’s enduring presence in human history, these books contribute to a reasoned understanding of propaganda as well as improved resilience to its effects."

While *Seeing Red* and *How to Win an Information War* both focus on a fixed time period and an established set of actors, the eighth edition of *Propaganda and Persuasion* (edited by Nancy Snow) provides an encyclopedic overview of and introduction to the nature of propaganda—what it is, how its use has evolved over time, and how to analyze its effects. Although designed and marketed as a student textbook, it has much to offer all those who seek a more in-depth understanding of how and why propaganda works.

The authors define propaganda at the outset as an “asymmetrical form of communication” that favors the propagandist. Persuasion, meanwhile, is a “symmetrical exchange” of information between “persuader and persuadee.” The entire volume turns on an understanding of propaganda as an imbalance of power between source and target.

Chock full of examples, the book provides tactical analyses and case studies drawn from a broad cross section of disciplines, to include history, political science, media studies, sociology, and psychology. *Propaganda and Persuasion* also handily summarizes multiple theoretical treatments of propaganda and tracks important historical shifts in approaches to its classification.

Chapters 1 and 4 offer detailed reviews of, respectively, conceptual and research approaches to propaganda and persuasion. Chapter 2 examines propaganda from the Greeks to the American Civil War, while Chapter 3 takes the modern “institutionalization” of propaganda through the digital age. Subsequent chapters weave back and forth between analyses of psychological warfare and weaponized propaganda; propaganda analytics and techniques; institutional and campaign structures; and audience identification and response, effects, and evaluation.

The four case studies in Chapter 7 are especially noteworthy. They provide actual examples of targeted influence campaigns, illustrating diverse applications of propaganda techniques. The studies analyze sources and actors, targeted audiences, strategies deployed, and attempts made to counter campaign impacts.

Unfortunately, while this is arguably the most comprehensive single study of propaganda available today, *Propaganda and Persuasion* is often difficult to follow. Many of the important concepts and definitions are repeated across multiple chapters. A handbook, by definition, should be easily navigable, but this one requires quite a bit of spadework to arrive at its genuinely useful insights and explanations.

As all three books tell us, there is no definitive corrective to the enduring presence—and power—of propaganda and disinformation. However, unlike much of the current literature on information manipulation and targeted influence campaigns, these books do not, thankfully, succumb to handwringing. Instead, each of them offers fact-based, contextualized approaches to defining propaganda's scope, nature, and impacts, and each provides tools and methodologies to address them.

By highlighting the vulnerability to disinformation created by the collapse of traditional media systems, the siren call of “belonging” at the heart of most influence campaigns, and propaganda's enduring presence in human history, these books contribute to a reasoned understanding of propaganda as well as improved resilience to its effects.

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