

# The Rise (and Fall) of Propaganda

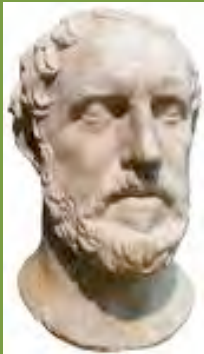


Geoff Nunberg  
Is103  
History of Information  
11/14/07



# Propaganda and Information

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Thucydides



Aristotle

Propaganda: As old as politics?



# Propaganda and the Modern State



Persuasion in the age of the press & public opinion as a political force: propaganda tracks the development of “news”

Cf Napoleon’s efforts to control the Parisian press, practice of paying subsidies to sympathetic newspapers...

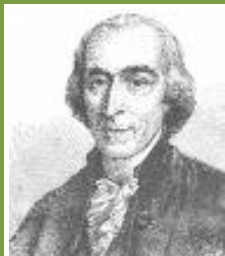




# Propaganda and the Modern State



Burke



Roland

## The origins of indirection & euphemism:

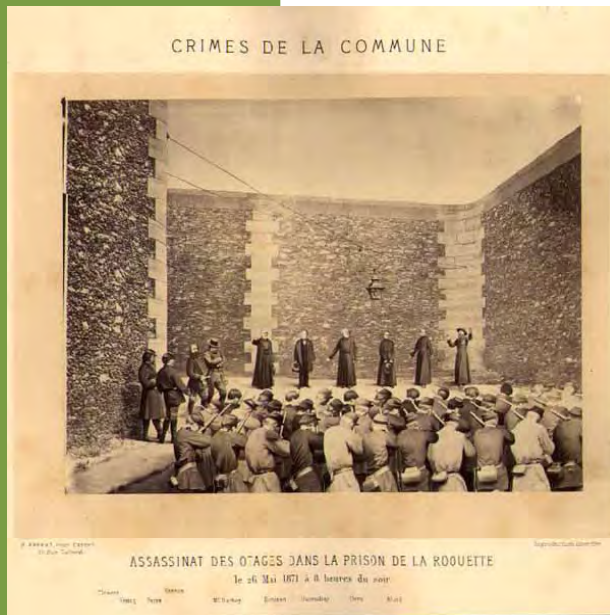
Through the whole of this long letter of Roland, it is curious to remark how the nerve and vigor of his style, which had spoken so potently to his sovereign, is relaxed when he addresses himself to the sans-culottes... When he speaks to the populace, he can no longer be direct. The whole compass of the language is tried to find synonymes and circumlocutions for massacre and murder. Things are never called by their common names. Massacre is sometimes *agitation*, sometimes *effervescence*, sometimes *excess*, sometimes *too continued an exercise of a revolutionary power*. Edmund Burke, 1793

Cf “casualty” in Crimean War, “Acts of collective indiscipline” in WWI





# Exploiting “Objectivity”



Paris Commune, 1871



Roger Fenton, Crimea, 1855





# Civil War: The army vs the press

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Conflicting interests of the state:

Seeks positive publicity, which entails giving reporters access

Avoiding negative publicity entails restricting access.

Cf Civil War conflicts between Meade & Edward Crapsey of the Phil. Inquirer

1864: Union Sec'y of War Edwin Stanton begins to "leak" his war diaries to AP, presaging practice of issuing regular war bulletins to the press

Efforts to win support of British press for each side...



## The Rise of “Propaganda”

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Propaganda (OED) (More fully, Congregation or College of the Propaganda.) A committee of Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church having the care and oversight of foreign missions, founded in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV.

"Before 1914, 'propaganda' belonged only to literate vocabularies and possessed a reputable, dignified meaning... Two years later the word had come into the vocabulary of peasants and ditchdiggers and had begun to acquire its miasmatic aura." Will Irwin, Propaganda and the News

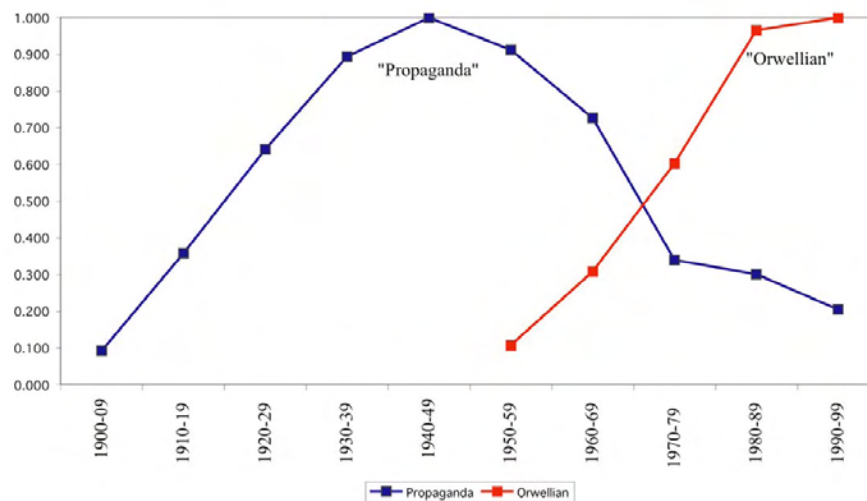
1922: Encyclopedia Britannica first includes propaganda as entry

States begin to take a direct role in creating & diffusing pro-government views.



# The Rise of "Propaganda"

Average Annual Frequency of "Propaganda" and "Orwellian" in *The New York Times*, by Decade

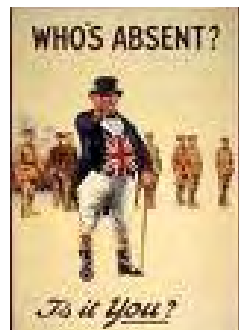
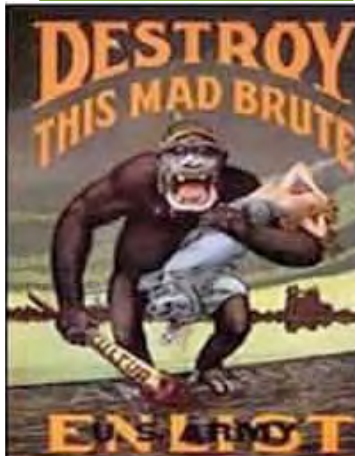




# The rise of propaganda: 1914-1917



OUR BOYS NEED  
**SOX**  
KNIT YOUR BIT



WWI: Creel Committee, "4-minute men," etc.  
75,000 speakers to give short speeches & lantern-slide presentations

75 million booklets distributed, in multiple languages

"We did not call it propaganda, for that word, in German hands, had come to be associated with deceit and corruption. Our effort was educational and informative throughout. No other argument was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of facts." George Creel



## After the War: The birth of the press agent

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Rise of publicists, press services.

“The development of the modern publicity man is a clear sign that the facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known. They must be given a shape by somebody, and since in the daily routine reporters cannot give a shape to facts... the need for some formulation is being met by the interested parties.” Walter Lippman, Public Opinion, 1923

Connection between propaganda, PR, & advertising  
(cf other languages)

Increasing suspicion of propaganda:

1939 poll shows 40 percent of Americans blame propaganda for the US entry into the First World War.



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## Rise of publicists, press services.

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. ...We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.

Edward Bernays, 1928



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## Propaganda in WWII

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Adoption of propaganda techniques by Roosevelt during WWII: Office of Facts and Figures --> Office of War Information

"the office is not a propaganda agency... We don't believe in this country in artificially stimulated, high-pressure, doctored nonsense." Fiorello La Guardia

The object is "to provide the public with sugar-coated, colored, ornamental matter, otherwise known as 'bunk.'" La Guardia, letter to FDR



## Playing the Race Card: Axis...



The Eternal Jew, German Poster, 1940



Italian Posters, 1944



# Playing the Race Card: the Allies





## Propaganda and the Cinema

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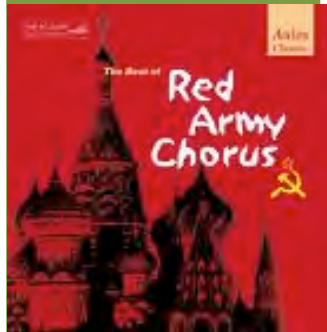
"The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most men's minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture."

Elmer Davis, director of Office of War Information

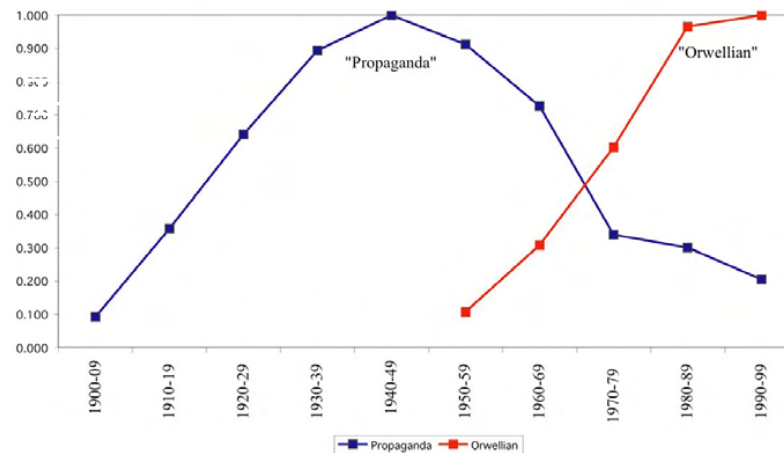




# After WWII: The decline of “propaganda”



Average Annual Frequency of "Propaganda" and "Orwellian" in *The New York Times*, by Decade



Propaganda = “What the other side does...”



## “Infoganda”

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2004: "Video News Releases" from the Office of National Drug Control Policy



2005: Revelation that Armstrong Williams accepted money to promote No Child Left Behind in TV and radio programs

Frank Rich, Jon Stewart speak of 'infoganda'



"Anyone who has questions about this practice needs to do some research on modern public information tools." HHS spokesperson

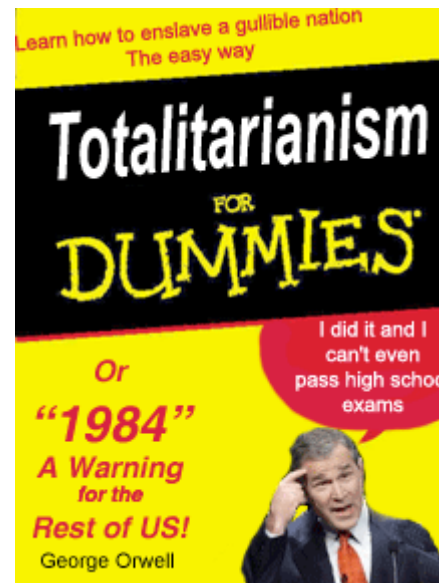


# The Orwell Cult

"Orwellian": 2,510,000 Google hits

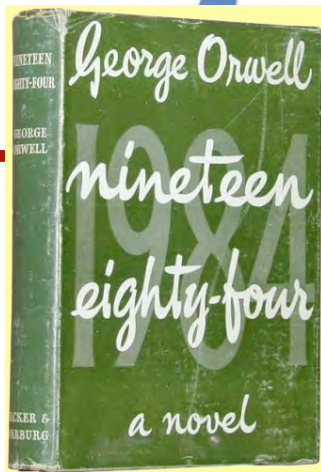
> *Kafkaesque*, *Hemingwayesque*, *Dickensian* put together

> *Machiavellian* (1.4 m)



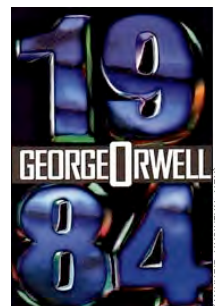


# The Orwell Cult



1984 Amazon ranking:  
126 (*The Road to Wigan  
Pier*: 25,989)

"Politics and the English  
Language": 190k Google  
hits





## Why a Paradox?

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Is the Orwell cult a natural reaction to an increase in the duplicitous use of language?

Complaints about the abuse of language track the use of language to control public opinion...



# The Totalitarian Specter

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1984, Michael Anderson, 1956



*Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl, 1934



# The Persistence of "Orwellian"

The ahistorical *1984*



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Apple Computer



## Some Paradoxes of the Orwell Cult

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But how to square belief in efficacy of Newspeak with the public's skepticism about political & corporate language?

The condescension of modern linguistic ideology...

"Mind you, I'm not fooled, but the man in the street"...

Skepticism about language: "mere semantics"

"That depends what the meaning of 'is' is."





## Orwell's Contribution to the Discussion

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### Totalitarian specters:

"Political language -- and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists -- is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"



## Meaning and Narrative

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No magic in words themselves

"To those concerned about the strength of American and family values, as I am, I say we are going to re- store those values..."

— Geraldine Ferraro, 1984

"A celebration of American values"

— slogan of Kerry-Edwards campaign.



## Meaning and Narrative

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*appeasement*: "The policy of granting concessions to potential enemies to maintain peace..." (AHD)



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