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Introduction¹

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The decision to structure this special issue around the concept of propaganda from past to present is a tribute to Nicholas Brownlees's life-long research in historical news discourse and in the history of English language. His work – including the publications stemming from the CHINED conferences that he initiated in Florence in 2004 (now in their 10th edition), the edited volumes resulting from the National PRIN projects that he coordinated, and the conferences and workshops that he organized in collaboration with the Medici Archive Project and International Studies Institute of Florence – has been a vital source of inspiration for the topics and methodologies presented in this collection of articles. Some of the aspects which characterised Nicholas's research and which informed the contributors' understanding of propaganda are the focus on producers and consumers of texts, the notion of public sphere, the role of context, the presentation and structuring of discourse, news management and control of the information, naming policy, rhetorical strategies for argumentation and forms of news / knowledge transmission and dissemination. The methodologies and approaches adopted are also reflective of Nicholas Brownlees's interest in (critical) discourse analysis, corpus-assisted discourse studies, historical pragmatics, digital humanities and multimodality.

The present volume stretches from the Middle Ages to the 21st century and encompasses a wide range of text types including poems, pamphlets, dictionaries, biographies, interviews, as well as print and online newspapers. The broad temporal scope helps shed light on aspects

¹ Although the authors worked closely on the preparation of the Introduction, Elisabetta Cecconi is responsible for Sections 1 and 2, Christina Samson for Section 3, and Isabella Martini for Sections 4 and 5.

of continuity and change in the management and control of information in relation to two major variables: the historical and socio-cultural context of text production and reception and important technological innovations, particularly the advent of print first and of the internet closer to our times. This introduction intends to provide an overview of the major forms of propaganda across different historical periods focusing on the text types exploited as vehicles for persuading the masses on crucial religious, political and social issues.

1. Propaganda in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, propaganda was primarily driven by religious and monarchical institutions which used symbols, rituals, and a variety of text types meant to guide and control public opinion. Not unlike in modernity, the medieval notion of the public was not static, but dynamic, as the *populus*, the people, involved a broad cross-section of society. Since efforts to elicit consensus over a political or a religious cause were aimed at both clergy and laity, elite and non-elite, it is very likely that a clear distinction was not always made by medieval communicators (Connell 2016). Even so, authors knew that the same objective could not always be obtained with the same text type and by using the same language: that is why they exploited different forms of propaganda and adapted their choice of language – Latin or vernacular – to their construction of the desired “public” depending on what the situation required.

Propaganda played a crucial role both in the process of secular state-building and in the papacy’s efforts to establish a central papal monarchy through campaigns against heresy and for crusades. In his analysis of 14th-century text types, Aberth (2001) provides an interpretation of medieval propaganda which recalls van Dijk’s ideological square principle of modern-day political discourse (van Dijk 1998). He notices that during the Hundred Years’ War what made Englishmen and Frenchmen more willing to kill each other was the propaganda disseminated on both sides:

to glorify one’s own cause by imbuing it with an almost mystical, religious aura and, at the same time, demonize one’s enemies by depicting them as motivated almost entirely by malice and evil. This was the essence of the new nationalism: to suffer and deal out death in the name of a country or a sovereign who can do no wrong, against a dehumanized enemy who is never in the right (Aberth 2001: 70).

While a univocal definition of the nature of propaganda in the Middle Ages has not been achieved yet, greater attention has been drawn to the rhetorical means and the textual forms through which propaganda was conveyed. During the Hundred Years' War, at the highest level propaganda assumed the form of an appeal to chivalry in epic poetry and for most Englishmen and Europeans chivalry was a synonym for King Arthur. The Arthurian legend was therefore widely manipulated by English monarchs, including Edward I and Edward III, to legitimize their political ambitions before the aristocratic community. Several poems (such as *Morte Arthure*, *Le Morte Arthur* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*) were written under inspiration of the Arthurian legend in the 14th and 15th centuries. By comparing himself to Arthur, the English monarch took on some of the chivalry's quasi-religious overtones of the hero, laying the foundation for the concept of divine right as the cornerstone of incipient absolutism (Aberth 2010: 71).

A large number of poems merged chivalry with religion reflecting the central role of Christianity in the Middle Ages. They exploited biblical stories, lives of saints, or experiences of Christian pilgrimage and salvation in order to promote the process of Christianization of England and purification from the sins of paganism. A case in point is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Written by an anonymous 14th-century poet, the poem is a chivalric romance that blends elements of adventure, morality and Christian symbolism, set against the backdrop of the Arthurian legend (Burrow 2008).

Several other text types were employed to shape political narratives and promote religious or secular agendas. In some cases, features of different text types co-existed in one single work, making it challenging to classify the genre in a straightforward manner (Thompson 2001: 391). Hagiographies, chronicles, sermons and treatises were among the most popular forms of propaganda. Hagiographies recounted the lives of saints but, far from being just a devotional or biographical text type, they acted as powerful tools of propaganda. They often depicted saints as individuals who had been divinely chosen and who acted as intermediaries between God and humans. Their circulation helped to reinforce the legitimacy of the Catholic Church, monarchs and local rulers who claimed divine favour. Hagiographies were also written to serve as *moral exempla* for the medieval audience. As Cubitt (2000: 37) observes, the power of hagiographical texts to affect behaviour lay in the role of the saints as exemplary types which demanded that their audience consciously internalize the models put before them. In addition, hagiographies were exploited to promote regional or national identities by elevating local saints to the status of religious icons (Turpie 2015). Saints

associated with particular places or regions became symbols of local pride, and their cults could be used to foster unity or resistance to outside powers.

Just like hagiographies, chronicles used the politics of memory to serve the propaganda purposes of the Church and the State (Cubitt 2000) as well as to foster national identities (Higgins 2015). By emphasizing certain events, battles or rulers, authors could control how the past was remembered and interpreted. In times of political upheaval or crisis, chronicles could be used to either justify the actions of a new ruler or discredit the legitimacy of a fallen dynasty. Medieval chronicles also contributed to the development of national identities by framing historical narratives in ways that emphasized ethnic unity and independence. A case in point is Fordun's *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*. Written in the early 14th century by a Scottish historian and priest, the chronicle fostered a sense of Scottish exceptionalism and resistance to English rule which would be very influential in later Scottish historical writing.

Another widely circulated propaganda text type was the sermon. Sermons were one of the most direct and widespread forms of mass persuasion used by clerics both in the cathedral and in the marketplace to influence the behaviour and beliefs of the laity, often aligning religious duties with political allegiance or promoting papal authority. Although Kienzle (2002) characterizes this text type as primarily an oral discourse, delivered by a preacher to instruct and exhort an audience on matters of faith and morality, sermons were often written before they were delivered or encapsulated afterwards and made available for reading. Even before the advent of print, copies of model sermons for reading circulated thanks to the relentless scribal activity of monasteries (Connell 2016).

In medieval England, the political landscape was shaped by continuous tensions between the monarchy, the nobility and the church. In this context, political tracts were employed to justify, challenge or explain the nature of power and authority. One of the earliest and most significant examples of this text type is the *Treatise on the Laws and Customs of England*, often attributed to Henry de Bracton (c. 1210-1268). Bracton's work provides a theoretical framework for English kingship that emphasized the monarch's role as the ultimate lawgiver, whose authority was derived from both divine right and the common law of the land (Jansen 2016). As English society became increasingly embroiled in civil wars and internal conflict in the 14th and 15th centuries, political treatises took on a more direct propaganda role, particularly as a means of both legitimating rulers and criticizing the power structures of their time.

2. Propaganda in the Early Modern period

The invention of the printing press in the mid-15th century revolutionized communication and the spread of ideas. Alongside established text types like sermons, biographies and chronicles, new forms of cheap print emerged that became powerful tools for propagandists. The emergence of print culture enabled ideas to spread rapidly and broadly, reaching a much larger audience than ever before, and gradually erasing the distinction between the élite and the common people (Zaret 2000; Sharpe – Zwicker 2003; Raymond 2011). This expansion of propaganda consumption was facilitated by rising literacy rates, a shift towards the use of vernacular languages, and the development of a postal system that made it easier to distribute information from place to place among various audiences. Although the notion of contemporaneity differed from our modern-day understanding of experiencing a particular event at more or less the same time, it was in the 16th and 17th centuries that “people began to formulate in their minds a concept of the world shared with others, within the same time and space, and within a basically secular context” (Dooley 2010: 2).

The Early Modern period was a time of intense religious and political conflict, and propaganda played a central role in justifying both religious reforms and political upheaval. Key events like the Protestant Reformation, the colonial expansion in the New World, the Thirty Years’ War, the English Civil War, the Glorious Revolution, and the rise of Enlightenment thought were all accompanied by powerful propaganda campaigns which took shape in a variety of print media. To shape public opinion and gain support for specific policies, various rhetorical strategies were employed, ranging from *ad locum* animadversion to ventriloquism, from omission to fabrication of news, and from irony and sarcasm to naming policies for representing in-groups and out-groups (Peacey 2004; Brownlees 2006; Suhr 2021). The persuasive power of these strategies was evident in broadside ballads, pamphlets and newspapers – three key text types that dominated the Early Modern print market and helped form influential moral and political communities of readers.

Broadside ballads were a form of cheap print which had populated the print market since the 16th century (Würzbach 1990; Watt 1991). As objects of mass consumption, they wielded a powerful influence that political and religious authorities could not afford to ignore. Printed on a single sheet of paper, typically accompanied by a woodcut illustration and a catchy tune, broadside ballads blended poetry, music and drama. They addressed

a wide range of social and cultural issues, drawing from traditional folk themes, legends, tales of love, crime, monstrous births, natural disasters and significant historical events. This broad thematic variety made them a powerful vehicle for political and nationalist messages, inheriting the appeal of mediaeval poems and romances.

From the 1580s the prose pamphlet became the most common medium to convey news and spread propaganda (Claridge 2000; Raymond 2003). Pamphlets were short quarto books typically consisting of between one and twelve sheets. They were swift to produce and relatively cheap to purchase also thanks to the smaller size and poorer quality of the paper and ink. Several factors contributed to their commercial success: 1) their accessibility, as pamphlets were cheap to produce and widely accessible to both the educated élite and common people; 2) their brevity and simplicity, since they were typically short and to the point, 3) their visual rhetoric exemplified in the use of images and illustrations to support arguments; 4) their polarization and partisanship, since pamphlets were deeply situated, reflecting the political and religious conflicts of the time and 5) their emotional appeal, as they were designed to evoke strong emotional responses, ranging from anger and anxiety to confidence and optimism.

Pamphlets were exploited to inflame the people's hearts during political and religious upheaval, to advocate for the Protestant reformation of morals and to promote colonial expansion with overly optimistic and deliberately distorted accounts of the occupation of new territories and life in the new settlements (Peacey 2004; Brownlees 2011: 1-24; Cecconi 2020, 2023). Despite its reputation for spreading misinformation and calumnies, this text type was extensively consumed, shared and passed on by people of diverse socio-cultural and economic backgrounds (Raymond 2003). Thanks to a surge in literacy, pamphlets could be read by tradesmen, merchants, manufacturers, skilled craftsmen, farmers, artisans and apprentices (Suhr 2011). Even the illiterate could approach their content simply by having a printed copy read by a neighbour, an apprentice or a clergyman (Fox 2000; Walsham 1999). Barbers too could provide a complimentary news reading service for their customers. Their shops acted as centres of news circulation and places where newsletters or pamphlets might be seen. Later on in the century, coffee houses offered a tremendous supplement to the reading services of barbers, as the coffee master himself and any of his customers would have been ready readers of a pamphlet (Fox 2000: 39).

The 17th century also marked the emergence of newspapers, with several key developments that helped the genre evolve into a powerful tool

for propaganda. A pivotal moment came in 1641 with the lapse of censorship in England, which triggered an unprecedented surge in printed news. This period saw significant experimentation among authors, publishers and pamphleteers, who began to report on domestic affairs. During the English Civil War, periodical pamphlets known as *newsbooks* entered the print market, laying the groundwork for the development of early newspapers. Newsbooks were published weekly and consisted of four or eight pages, which were sold for one or two pennies (Greenspan 2023). Both royalists and parliamentarians leveraged these publications to promote their own political agendas, recounting victories and defeats from their respective ideological standpoints, in order to rally support and sway public opinion (Peacey 2004; Brownlees 2006, 2011; Greenspan 2023: 474-475). According to Raymond, the 1640s saw the press emerge as an arena for propagandistic conflict, stimulating public debate and engagement. This led him to hypothesize that the public sphere, as originally described by Habermas, may have emerged earlier than the 1670s or 1680s – potentially even before the Civil Wars (Raymond 1999: 114). The republican governments sought to manage the transmission of information and its content by minimising royalist and other potentially critical newspapers and maximising the spread of news favourable to the Commonwealth and Protectorate regimes. This control of information implied suppression or distortion of news in case of governmental failures, as was the case with the fiasco of Cromwell’s Western Design in 1655 (Greenspan 2023).

After the Restoration in 1660, partisan newsbooks gave way to the *London Gazette*, which became the official government newspaper. Its primary role was to disseminate official news and ensure the public’s alignment with the Crown’s interests. This marked the beginning of a system of state-controlled or state-regulated news dissemination, setting a precedent for future government-backed publications.

By the end of the 17th century newspapers started to experiment with running ads alongside news content (Brownlees 2017). These early ads were simple, text-based, and typically included brief descriptions of products or services, often followed by contact details or information on where to purchase them. Advertisements ranged from book and job listings to promotions for medicines and treatments offered by apothecaries and doctors. The century also witnessed the foundation of the first English scientific journal, *The Philosophical Transactions*, under the auspices of the Royal Society in 1665. The journal reported on letters between scientists as well as accounts of discoveries, experiments and observations in various

scientific fields. Book reviews and book announcements, sometimes verging on advertisements, were common text types in scientific periodicals and reflected the new spirit of consumerism that was emerging in society (Taavitsainen 2021).

The first half of the 18th century recorded an explosion in the number of newspapers and periodicals, partly due to the rise of literacy and the increasing commercialization of the press. The demand for news spurred the creation of titles reporting on crucial political and military events such as the Glorious Revolution and the Jacobite uprisings (Greenspan 2023: 488). Newspapers became an arena of discourses and counter-discourses, while advertisements became more varied, shifting from basic product promotions to broader categories such as public events, entertainment, services and patent medicines (Gotti 2005; Brownlees 2017).

Other text types which were harnessed as vehicles for the classification of knowledge and dissemination of information in the Early Modern period were dictionaries and encyclopaedias (Iamartino 2018, 2020; Lonati 2020). The relationship between propaganda and the above text types was a nuanced one, reflecting how intellectual works – particularly those that aimed to organize and disseminate knowledge – were often influenced by political, social and cultural agendas. In an era of intense political upheaval, scientific discovery and philosophical advancement, these publications were not merely neutral collections of facts and definitions, but were shaped by specific ideological and socio-political perspectives, contributing to the promotion of certain views and the marginalization of others.

3. Propaganda in the Late Modern period

In the 19th century the expansion of literacy and advances in printing technology during the industrial revolution led to an increase of the press serving as a powerful tool for governments, political movements and prominent figures to influence public attitudes, perceptions and promote agendas (Lippmann 1922). Furthermore, the numerous education acts meant that an entire generation of Britons had grown up under a system of compulsory education and was then satiated by the rise of a cheap mass press, which had itself been facilitated by the erosion of taxes on knowledge throughout the century (Hewitt 2014; Sumpter 2006). During this period, the flourishing of new newspapers was joined by illustrated journals, photography, music halls, modernised forms of art and caricature,

advertising and commercial ephemera all providing a far wider range of tools for propagandists.

Moreover, technological developments were found in the expansion of railways, steamships and towards the end of the century wireless telegraphy, all of which increased the mobility of both people and information around the world (Samson 2022). Three reform acts eventually led to an increase in the electorate to nearly two thirds of the adult male population, including for the first time coal miners and agricultural labourers, that produced a situation in which politicians could gain popularity by influencing the public opinion.

At the time, debates raged in Britain as to the beneficial or malignant nature of public opinion, since it had been recognised as a motivating force in British politics which intensified in the second half of the 19th century. Lippmann, for instance, expressed his doubts regarding the existence of authentic public opinion:

Those features of the world outside which have to do with the behaviour of other human beings, in so far as that behaviour crosses ours, is dependent upon us, or is interesting to us, we call roughly public affairs. The pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationship, are their public opinions. Those pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters (Lippmann 1922: 29).

Such a view was also shared by those who were well informed and interested in public affairs, since, as Lippmann (1922: 154) claimed, only “omnicompetent citizens” could develop an authentic public opinion capable of directing the course of government. This was a theory that could only fit the needs of very small communities, but was completely inadequate for great democracies and larger states, therefore it was seen as a myth (Regalzi 2012).

With this came the unsettling idea that groups and individuals, inside and outside Parliament, could and were able to manipulate public opinion for their own benefit, and it was this issue that led to phrases like the “manufacture of public opinion” which appeared frequently in the works of theorists, journalists and other authors in late 19th-century Britain (Hobson 2016). However, as the electorate increased rapidly, the question that detained many theorists was how such mass opinion should be controlled.

As a consequence, news discourse began to adopt a more standardised linguistic style which was characterised by a veneer of objectivity that often concealed subtle forms of propaganda.

The term propaganda was not commonly used in this period, even though its functions – promoting certain political, social and ideological goals – were clearly present in newspapers, pamphlets and other printed materials. The term had acquired not only an educational connotation but also the function of forming public opinion by shaping the public's perceptions through the use of persuasive communication (Samson 2025). O'Donnell and Kable (1982: 9) define persuasion as a communicative process to influence others:

A persuasive message has a point of view or desired behaviour for the recipient to adopt in a voluntary fashion. Persuasion is a complex, continuing, interactive process in which a sender and a receiver are linked by symbols, verbal and nonverbal, through which the persuader attempts to influence the persuadee to adopt a change in a given attitude or behaviour because the persuadee has had perceptions enlarged or changed (O'Donnell – Kable 1982: 9).

Moreover, Schiappa (2003) argues that words are always persuasive because they carry with them a whole system of values, and the use of a word is always an implicit argument to attain certain goals by means of the system of evaluation that the definition of the word defends.

Newspapers, therefore, played a pivotal role not only in informing but also in persuading readers to believe the content of the narrations within, as in the case of justifying colonial expansion and imperial dominance. For instance, colonies were depicted as uncivilised or savage, thus positioning British rule as a civilising mission and, consequently, portraying colonial conquests as heroic endeavours which emphasised the benevolent nature of imperialism while downplaying or ignoring the negative impacts of colonisation on indigenous populations (Wagner 2018). More specifically, during conflicts such as the Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815), the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Indian uprisings (1857-1858), the press played a significant role in fostering nationalism and supporting military efforts. Newspapers would often sensationalise enemy atrocities or exaggerate the heroism of British forces, in order to promote a sense of unity and pride among the British public by publishing private letters which generated emotive reactions in readers.

Letters are considered private when two parties are involved and reciprocal communication is not to be divulged, but in the case of private letters contextualising conflicts in the press, the private communicative context undergoes a re-contextualisation of space, place and emotions (Samson 2025). The events are discursively represented within social practices that regulate collective interaction in what can be termed a multi-layered context. The concept, drawing on Pahta and Taavitsainen (2010), involves both textual contexts and socio-historical conditions of text production with its societal, situational, historical, ideological and material sides including the writers' and readers' language attitudes and their social and situational context.

In turning from private into public, letters have, consequently, been directly connected to a wider sense of public engagement and have frequently been published when news took long to reach England from the colonies, acquiring therefore a referential-expressive function (Samson 2022). This has led to a view of letters which appeared as personal communication in the press as actually carefully crafted and curated products of editorial processes, or according to Wahl-Jorgensen (2002), construed through the co-creation of news workers and letter writers. As such, letters turn from unmediated into highly mediated texts through journalistic routines, including those of editorial selectivity (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002; Gregory – Hutchins 2004). The latter privileged letters that related to content already on the news agenda and were therefore “moulded” to fit journalistic criteria, given their public significance (Brownlees et al. 2010) and their importance as gauges of public opinion and as the conduit for many editorially orchestrated campaigns (Conboy 2010).

As a matter of fact, letters can have several purposes. On the one hand, as in the case of conflicts, they morally orient readers with the newspaper's editorial position, while serving as a space for a variety of opinions and revealing glimpses of how ordinary people made sense of major events and crises unfolding around them (Jones 2016). This positioned readers' letters as a manifestation of pre-existing conversations already occurring elsewhere, a view shared by mid-Victorian editors. As Hampton (2004) argues, an ideal of politics by public discussion on the questions of the day permeated mid-Victorian elite society and the model of the rationally debating citizen was central in the creation of discourses of journalism in the early nineteenth century (Chalaby 1998; Wahl-Jorgensen 2007), leading to journalism of representation (Hampton 2004) with a strong social and political impact. On the other hand, epistolary narratives helped to contextualise the conflicts

through reciprocal productions of place (Caquard 2011). The orientation elements in letters published in the press connected writers and readers (Herman 2001), while helping to express human experience and lived space, since narrative itself can be a “spatially symbolic act” (Tally 2011) and (re)orientation can be managed and achieved in or through more or less emotive narratives which enhanced a sense of nationalism and imperialism.

Furthermore, letters to the editor contributed to the transformation of pronunciation into a “status emblem”. This process was not simply top-down, as letters to the editor offered a participatory space in which ordinary readers voiced their views, debated authoritative claims, and helped draw the boundaries of acceptability and deviance in speech. The effort to define and defend “proper” pronunciation spanned throughout the 19th century, a period marked not only by the codification of linguistic norms, but also by their ongoing negotiation, enforcement, and contestation in the pages of the press. Pronunciation debates became not only reflections of linguistic change, but active sites for the construction and contestation of social identity, as accent became a shorthand for broader concerns about class, morality, respectability and national belonging.

The 19th century was also characterised by an explosion of periodicals. In the early Victorian period these were mostly expensive highbrow quarterlies and monthly reviews such as *The Quarterly Review*, *The Edinburgh Review* and *The Westminster Review*, which were all aimed at educated and well-to-do readers. However, also a range of cheap, usually poorly printed “penny dreadfuls” and sensational magazines flourished and were bought by the poor (Boardman 2006). By contrast, in the mid-Victorian period the growth of the middle classes led to the creation of a wide range of periodicals aimed at a family readership, such as *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, Charles Dickens’s *Household Words*, and more stylishly printed journals such as *The Cornhill* and *Once a Week*. Later in the century, the market for magazines was huge and multiform and periodicals included photographic illustrations.

While targeting new readerships, especially women, periodicals functioned as a crucial platform for shaping public opinion by disseminating information and fostering cultural and social change by taking various forms, ranging from subtle reinforcement of societal expectations to overt promotion of feminist ideals. Periodicals like the *English Woman’s Journal* and *The Women’s Penny Paper* actively championed women’s rights and education, while magazines such as Tonna’s *Christian Lady’s Magazine* and Eliza Cook’s *Journal* often downplayed the need for significant change (DiCenzo 2010)

by focusing on domestic skills, fashion and the traditional roles of women in the home. These magazines often used idealised portrayals of women as wives and mothers, reinforcing the “Angel in the House” archetype role of Victorian women. Others that did not explicitly advocate for radical change could, nevertheless, include subtle persuasion through the portrayal of women’s roles and experiences. For example, an article might discuss the importance of education while implying that women should also be able to pursue careers outside the home.

Periodicals which were instead associated with the feminist movement, like the *English Woman’s Journal*, actively promoted women’s education, employment and suffrage, as they featured articles, essays and even fictional narratives that challenged the status quo and advocated for greater equality. While feminist or campaign-based publications often defined their relationship with the established press in antagonistic terms, they nevertheless seized on favourable coverage as a measure of the efficacy of their work. This tension (between criticism and validation) underscores the degree of influence “the Press” was credited with having, even though its very status and reliability as a gauge of public opinion had been under attack since the early decades of the century (Hampton 2004). By exposing distortions and omissions in the press, feminist journals encouraged a critical perspective on current sources of news and information and, in doing so, they were also redefining who constituted the public and what it needed to know. For example, some periodicals particularly focused on the suffrage movement used imagery and cartoons to convey their message, whereas opponents used caricatures to mock suffragists. Supporters, on the other hand, used illustrations to portray women as capable and deserving of the vote.

In the late 19th century, a shift in perspective emerged with the rise of the “New Woman” that implied cigarette-smoking, bicycle-riding and trouser-wearing. This movement challenged traditional gender roles and explored the complexities of women’s lives and desires, often criticising the constraints of the “Angel in the House” ideology while advocating reforms which meant women could enter university and retain property, while improving their intellectual and economic positions (DiCenzo 2004). Women’s advancement was also covered by the influential *Women’s Penny Paper* that was committed to broad coverage of general and specific English and foreign news. These periodicals served as a battleground for competing ideologies about women’s roles and rights and their persuasive discourses, both overt and subtle, reveal the complexities and nuances of Victorian society’s evolving views on women.

Included in such complexity was also the idea that Britain had to civilise the world as well as increase moral development and commercial improvement, all ideas that were underscored by an outburst of biographical production. Biographies served multiple purposes while reflecting evolving societal values and literary trends which often aimed to provide moral guidance by portraying exemplary lives. A case in point are publisher biographies which reconciled the values of literature and commerce, as they configured the reforms spearheaded by booksellers, not as self-serving manoeuvres for or against protectionism, but as a civilising force and a democratisation of literacy, knowledge and taste (Broughton 2020). Such works highlighted virtues like diligence, piety and integrity, offering readers models for personal conduct. This approach aligned with the era's educational literature, reinforcing societal norms and values, aiming to locate the single most motivational value of a subject. In other words, such biographies were often written to idealise and display the moral virtues of the subject by presenting one's life as an example of moral integrity which led to the creation of the concept of hero-worshipping (Atkinson 2010). There was a general agreement that the nation would benefit from worshipping great individuals, though there was no consensus on who they were and often the association between greatness and goodness was a naïve one. However, what counted is that such biographies were charged with imperialist propaganda which typifies the Victorian period (Atkinson 2010).

The biographical genre also represented the negotiation of cultural tensions by taking into consideration subjects for which it did not immediately seem suited. By remoulding the representation of particular individuals, for instance female writers or social groups such as poets, painters or sects belonging to marginality, implied a reconsideration of the relationship between the biographer, the subject and the reader, since the subject was deliberately removed from the shadows (Booth 2004). The value of 'obscure lives' had the function of elaborating narratives which challenged the general narrowness and uniformity of nineteenth-century life writing. By rescuing the subject, a moral regeneration could be brought to the reader and implicitly to the nation (Woolf 2023). It was therefore considered a way to address the nation as a whole by reminding its duty towards the artists, the poor or the neglected.

In contrast, other biographers, for example Strachey, chose to focus on famous men and women by laying the foundation for the multidimensional biography, that is, an approach in direct contrast with the Victorian unidimensional biography. In this perspective, anecdotes acquired a central

role in analysing one's personality, as it was believed that they revealed the individual's character in selective traits, thus becoming the focal part of its narrative structure (Thirriard 2025) for imperial propagandistic purposes.

These biographies constantly move between an individual and a national perspective and they laid the foundations for a type of biographical writing which later Virginia Woolf picked up and remoulded, and that is still popular today.

4. Propaganda in the 20th century

The 20th century marked a pivotal era in the evolution of the discourse of propaganda, its practices and its means. Already in the first decades of the century, as Bernays notes, a marked shift had already occurred in the practice and instruments of propaganda, particularly after World War I:

It was, of course, the astounding success of propaganda during the war that opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind. The American government and numerous patriotic agencies developed a technique which, to most persons accustomed to bidding for public acceptance, was new. They not only appealed to the individual by means of every approach – visual, graphic, and auditory – to support the national endeavour, but they also secured the cooperation of the key men in every group – persons whose mere word carried authority to hundreds or thousands or hundreds of thousands of followers (Bernays 1928: 27).

As it is widely known, the unprecedented evolution of mass communication was influenced by the rise of mass media, with radio, cinema and advertising progressively developing as powerful tools for shaping public perception. However, despite the increasing dominance of these audio-visual media, print texts retained a significant role in influencing public opinion, particularly in the realm of propaganda (Ellul 1965; John – Silberstein-Loeb 2015). Newspapers and leaflets continued to be some of the most prevalent print mediums. The expansion of national and international newspapers (Conboy – Bingham 2020) facilitated the widespread dissemination of propaganda, allowing governments and political entities to shape public narratives on a grand scale (Chomsky – Herman 1988), influencing public opinion and political landscapes across Europe and beyond.

During both World Wars, governments harnessed the press to disseminate information aimed at bolstering national morale and garnering support for military efforts. In the United Kingdom, the British Council's publication *Britain To-day* functioned as a tool of cultural diplomacy between 1945 and 1954, reflecting the intertwined nature of cultural and informational strategies in post-war Britain (Byrne 2015). During this period newspapers were not simply conveyors of factual reporting – they were curated platforms for state messaging and soft power projection. The Cold War era further exemplified the strategic deployment of the press in global propaganda efforts. In Britain, the covert activities of the Foreign Office's Information Research Department (IRD) reveal the extent to which state institutions sought to manipulate journalistic content. The IRD supplied selected journalists with anti-communist material intended to influence both domestic and international opinion, embedding state-sponsored narratives within ostensibly independent news outlets (Lucas – Morris 2023). These examples highlight the international scope of press-based propaganda and the essential function newspapers performed in shaping public discourse throughout the century.

Central to this propaganda function was the strategic use of language in news discourse. As scholars such as Jowett and O'Donnell (2018) have noted, propaganda is inherently communicative and relies on specific rhetorical techniques to influence attitudes and behaviour. Newspapers frequently employed loaded language, i.e., terms imbued with emotional connotation, as well as emotional appeals to frame events and actors in ways that aligned with ideological objectives and with the editorial agenda of the newspaper, also in letters to the editor (Martini 2025). Chilton and Schäffner (2002) argue that political discourse – especially in the context of propaganda – is often structured to elicit emotional resonance rather than factual clarity. For example, descriptions of wartime enemies often relied on dehumanizing language to justify violence and foster national unity. Also, by invoking fear, pride or moral outrage, newspapers could bypass rational critique and appeal directly to the affective responses of their readers. Similarly, repetition of key slogans or ideological positions across articles served to normalize specific worldviews within public consciousness. According to Richardson (2007), repetition in news discourse reinforces authority and discourages critical interrogation by presenting information as self-evident. These linguistic strategies were not confined to any single national context but were part of a transnational toolkit of persuasion, used by democratic and authoritarian regimes alike throughout the 20th century.

Among printed media outlets, leaflets, in particular, became invaluable during wartime, serving as a direct method of audience targeting (Wardle – Derakhshan 2017). The language used in these print materials was carefully crafted to maximize impact. Euphemisms were commonly employed to sanitize controversial actions, such as referring to civilian casualties as the result of “strategic bombing” (Ellul 1965). Additionally, an “Us vs. Them” (van Dijk 2009) rhetoric permeated these texts, portraying enemies as existential threats to national or moral values (McChesney 2013). Citations of pseudo-scientific data further lent credibility to ideological claims, reinforcing bias (Henderson – Braun 2016). Historical examples illustrate the effectiveness of these strategies; for instance, during World War I, leaflets dropped by aircraft urged enemy troops to surrender, using simple language and assurances of humane treatment (Wardle – Derakhshan 2017). Meanwhile, Nazi Germany’s newspapers, such as *Der Stürmer*, propagated anti-Semitic rhetoric, often fabricating evidence to justify discriminatory policies (Marwick – Lewis 2017).

Political manifestos also emerged as critical propaganda tools throughout the 20th century, particularly during elections and revolutionary movements (Tannen 1998). These documents played a crucial role in shaping public ideology and rallying support for political causes (McChesney 2013). The linguistic techniques within manifestos were deliberately structured to reinforce messages. Repetition of slogans ensured key ideas remained ingrained in public consciousness, while dichotomous language framed political struggles as a battle between the “virtuous” in-group and the “corrupt” out-group (Chomsky – Herman 1988). Rhetorical devices, such as parallelism, enhanced the persuasiveness of these texts. A prime example is the *Fascist Manifesto* of 1919, in which Mussolini outlined his vision for a nationalist, authoritarian state, using dramatic language to promise societal renewal and unity (Marwick – Lewis 2017).

Another major medium for propaganda of the 20th century was film and radio, which, though primarily audio-visual, relied heavily on scripted texts to convey their messages. Propaganda films and radio broadcasts followed a monologic discourse, often delivered by a singular authoritative voice to assert dominance over the narrative (Henderson – Braun 2016). The use of soundbites and concise phrasing made messages more memorable, while strategic modality reinforced the certainty and inevitability of the propagandist’s claims (Ellul 1965). One of the most famous examples of this technique were British wartime radio broadcasts, particularly the speeches of Winston Churchill. His use of inspirational and defiant language played a crucial role in bolstering public morale during World War II (McChesney

2013). Similarly, propaganda films, such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), used carefully crafted scripts to glorify Nazi ideology and reinforce the cult of leadership surrounding Adolf Hitler. While visual elements played a significant role, the text and narration in these films remained central to their persuasive power (Kershaw 2000; Welch 2004).

Throughout the 20th century, advertising too became a powerful tool for disseminating propaganda, influencing consumer behaviour and shaping societal values. Pioneering figures such as Edward Bernays, often called the father of modern propaganda, demonstrated how mass communication could be leveraged to sway public opinion and promote products, services or ideologies (Bernays 1928). Bernays' work highlights the central role of advertising in constructing social realities through carefully orchestrated messages aimed at shaping public desires and behaviors. In advertising, various linguistic techniques were employed to manipulate consumer perceptions and drive purchasing decisions. One prevalent strategy was the use of loaded language – words and phrases with strong emotional connotations that evoke reactions beyond their literal meaning (Vestergaard – Schroder 1985). For example, adjectives like “new,” “improved,” or “exclusive” were used to create a sense of urgency or desirability, enhancing the appeal of products by associating them with positive emotions or societal approval (Vestergaard – Schroder 1985). These techniques are also central to the persuasive power of advertising, as they appeal to consumers' psychological responses rather than rational decision-making.

Repetition also played a crucial role in reinforcing brand messages and ensuring memorability. Advertisers often repeated slogans, brand names or product features in various forms of media to embed them into consumers' minds, making them more familiar and persuasive. This repetition helped enhance brand recall and influenced consumer purchasing behaviour (Tannen 2011). The strategic use of repetition in advertising reinforces the brand's presence in the consumer's mind, ensuring that it is associated with certain values or emotions.

Emotional appeals were a cornerstone also of advertising propaganda. Advertisements frequently capitalized on consumers' emotions – such as fear, happiness, or nostalgia – to create a connection between the product and the consumer's emotional state (Pawle – Cooper 2006). For instance, ads that depicted families enjoying a meal together sought to associate the product with warmth and togetherness, fostering a sense of connection and well-being. By invoking such emotions, advertisements bypass rational analysis and engage consumers on a deeper, affective level.

The use of “glittering generalities” involved the use of vague, positive-sounding words that lacked concrete meaning but conveyed a sense of goodness or desirability. Phrases like “the best a man can get” or “have it your way” evoke positive feelings without providing specific information about the product’s attributes (Leiss et al. 1990). These generalities are often designed to resonate on an emotional level with the consumer, conveying an idealized image that associates the product with personal satisfaction or societal success. Additionally, advertisers frequently employed techniques such as bandwagon appeals, suggesting that a product was popular and that “everyone was using it,” thereby encouraging consumers to conform (Pawle – Cooper 2006). Stereotyping was also used to target specific demographic groups, aligning products with certain lifestyles or identities.

These linguistic and rhetorical strategies reinforced social norms and encouraged conformity through implicit messages embedded in the advertisements; they underscore the sophisticated ways in which advertising has served as a vehicle for propaganda, subtly shaping consumer behavior and societal norms throughout the 20th century. To conclude, over the decades propaganda has evolved alongside mass communication, adapting to modern technologies while keeping the core principles of strategic messaging. Whether through print, political manifestos or scripted media, the deliberate use of language remained central to shaping public opinion and influencing societal outcomes.

5. Propaganda in the 21st century

The 21st century has seen a dramatic shift in how propaganda is produced, disseminated and consumed, primarily due to the rise of digital technologies and social media platforms (Tufekci 2017; Shirky 2011). Traditional print and broadcast media, including broadcast interviews, remain influential, but they are now complemented – and in some cases overshadowed – by newer text types, such as social media posts, memes, blogs and algorithm-driven content (Papacharissi 2015). The defining features of 21st-century propaganda texts are their brevity, interactivity and their ability to spread virally across global networks within minutes (Gladwell 2000) This era of propaganda is characterized by a blend of multimodal elements – text, images, and video – integrated into concise yet highly impactful forms of communication (Shifman 2014).

Research indicates that political leaders’ communications during health crises can blur the lines between informative messaging and propaganda.

The use of emotional appeals, selective fact-sharing and persuasive language in broadcast interviews and social media posts has been documented as strategies meant to sway public opinion and behavior (Rivas-de-Roca – Pérez-Curiel 2023). Broadcast interviews with politicians, international operatives and diplomats have long served as powerful tools for disseminating propagandistic messages, both historically and during recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews provide direct channels for leaders to influence public perception, shape political narratives and advance strategic agendas (Jowett – O’Donnell 2018).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, broadcast interviews have continued to play a significant role in disseminating information and, at times, propagandistic messages. Political leaders and health officials have used interviews to promote public health measures, address vaccine hesitancy and manage crisis communication. However, studies have shown that some of these communications employed propaganda techniques, such as emphasizing emotional appeals and selective presentation of facts, in order to influence public perception and behaviour. Milani, Weitkamp, and Webb (2020), for example, analysed tweets from political leaders during the vaccination rollout and found that communications often utilized propaganda mechanisms, including emotional language and emphasis, to encourage vaccination uptake.

Beside traditional broadcast interviews, one significant text type used in contemporary propaganda is the social media post, which has become a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and political discourse. Social media posts are inherently brief, with platforms like X (previously known as Twitter) restricting content to short, pithy messages. This brevity encourages the use of linguistic features such as hashtags, which not only summarize complex ideas into a single word or phrase, but also allow content to become part of broader discussions, amplifying its visibility (Pariser 2011). For example, during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, hashtags like #MakeAmericaGreatAgain served as both slogans and rallying cries, encapsulating entire ideologies into compact and easily shareable forms (Tufekci 2017). Additionally, emotionally charged language and sensational headlines are frequently used to provoke strong reactions, ensuring greater engagement (Lazer et al. 2018). Social media posts also rely heavily on hyperlinks and multimedia elements, directing users to additional content such as videos or articles, creating a layered, immersive propaganda experience (Papacharissi 2015).

With the transition of traditional printed news towards digital news platforms and apps for portable devices, where readers can interact with the

news directly, user-generated comments beneath news articles have evolved into influential components of news discourse, often serving as conduits for propagandistic messages. These comment sections, designed to foster reader engagement, have become arenas where diverse linguistic strategies are employed to sway public opinion and amplify their persuasive impact. Studies have shown that comments frequently contain uncivil language, including insults and hostile expressions, which can escalate emotional reactions and reinforce in-group solidarity (Ksiazek 2016). Such incivility is not merely a by-product of online anonymity, but often aligns with strategic efforts to dominate discourse and marginalize opposing viewpoints. The aggressive tone used in many comments often serves to polarize audiences and amplify divisive narratives, furthering the spread of specific narratives and potentially influencing readers' beliefs and behaviours (Ksiazek 2016). Moreover, the repetition of certain narratives within comment threads can create a false sense of consensus, a tactic reminiscent of traditional propaganda methods. This repetition can lead readers to perceive fringe opinions as mainstream, manipulating public perception, influencing the interpretation of news and shaping narratives through strategic engagement (Kubin et al. 2024).

Another notable 21st-century text type is the meme, which combines text with imagery to create a highly compressed and visually striking message. Memes rely on humour, satire and cultural references to engage audiences, making them particularly effective at disseminating propaganda in a way that feels informal and accessible (Shifman 2014). Linguistically, memes often employ sarcasm, irony and minimal text to communicate complex ideas succinctly. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, memes were widely used to promote both factual information and misinformation. On one side, government agencies and health organizations created shareable graphics encouraging mask-wearing and vaccinations. Conversely, conspiracy groups spread anti-vaccine propaganda through memes that depicted vaccines as harmful or government-driven plots, using stark imagery and fear-inducing captions to undermine trust in public health initiatives (Donovan et al. 2022). The viral nature of memes allows propaganda to reach audiences across demographic and ideological divides, with their humour and relatability masking the often-manipulative intent behind them (Shifman 2014).

In addition to social media, user-generated comments and memes, fake news articles and clickbait headlines have emerged as critical text types in 21st-century propaganda (Suhr 2021). These articles mimic traditional journalism but are designed to mislead readers, often employing

sensationalized language, false statistics and unverified claims to advance political or ideological agendas (Lazer et al. 2018). The linguistic features of fake news include alarmist vocabulary, appeals to authority through fabricated “experts,” and cherry-picking of data to fit a predetermined narrative. For example, during the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, false claims about the financial costs of EU membership were circulated through articles with inflammatory headlines, such as “We Send £350 Million a Week to the EU!”. These claims, while debunked, influenced public opinion by exploiting cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and emotional reasoning (Benkler et al. 2018).

Furthermore, algorithm-driven content on platforms like YouTube and Facebook has introduced a new layer to the spread of propaganda. Algorithms prioritize engagement, often promoting content that elicits strong emotional responses, such as fear, anger or outrage. This has led to the proliferation of conspiracy theories and extremist propaganda in the form of video essays, commentaries and targeted advertisements (Pariser 2011). Linguistically, these texts often employ persuasive techniques such as anecdotal evidence, repetition and appeals to emotion, creating a sense of urgency or fear. For instance, during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, videos falsely alleging widespread voter fraud were promoted to users likely to engage with such content, reinforcing existing biases and deepening political polarization (Benkler et al. 2018).

The adaptability and reach of these digital text types have fundamentally transformed propaganda in the 21st century. They enable rapid dissemination of information to global audiences, blur the line between fact and opinion and exploit the participatory nature of digital media to foster user-generated content that perpetuates propaganda narratives (Tufekci 2017; Shirky 2011). The combination of linguistic strategies like emotive appeals, brevity and multimodal integration ensures that 21st-century propaganda is more pervasive, persuasive and difficult to counter than ever before.

6. The studies in this issue

In the first contribution to this special issue, **Letizia Vezzosi** reinterprets the Middle English alliterative poem *Saint Erkenwald* not as a traditional hagiography, but as a vehicle of political and theological propaganda. Departing from established genres like *vitae* or *miracula*, the poem is framed as promoting orthodoxy and national identity in late medieval England.

Using discourse analysis, stance theory and lexical analysis, Vezzosi examines how metaphor, deictic shifts and sacramental language encode a unified Christian and national identity. Central to this is the re-contextualisation of the Trajan legend, in which Saint Erkenwald baptizes a just pagan judge, enabling his salvation. This narrative act forges a symbolic link between a mythologised British past and a Christian present, positioning London as a spiritual and cultural inheritor. Through detailed linguistic and structural analysis, the study argues that the poem affirms the Church's sacramental authority while reinforcing emergent English identity, thus contributing to ideological consensus amid the political and religious tensions of the period.

Elisabetta Cecconi examines propaganda discourse in a corpus of 17th-century English pamphlets (PonJ_corpus) about the occupation and colonization of Jamaica between 1655 and 1700. Drawing on the definition of propaganda as a deliberate attempt to influence people's thoughts and behaviours (Taylor 2003), Cecconi analyses how information was strategically presented to encourage migration to the new colony. By applying principles of corpus-assisted discourse studies, the paper explores how language was used to highlight the colony's profitable aspects while minimizing or suppressing its drawbacks. The findings reveal that collocational patterns around the four most frequent keywords in the corpus (i.e., island, Spaniards, Jamaica, Indians) played a significant role in shaping the message and influencing readers' perceptions and behaviours in the changing socio-political context of the time.

The representation of the English language is analysed by **Elisabetta Lonati** in three major 18th-century British encyclopaedias – Chamber's *Cyclopaedia* (1728), *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1768-1771), and Rees's *Cyclopaedia* (1778-1788) – to identify its role in shaping national and linguistic identity during the rise of the British nation-state and Empire. Focusing on the term "Language," the study highlights how these works contributed to the construction of English as a prestigious and robust language capable of reflecting the civil, cultural and intellectual transformations of contemporary British society. By contrast, other European languages, such as Italian, Spanish and French, were depicted as declining, effeminate or exaggerated. Lonati shows how the rhetoric linking language, national identity and the expanding Empire, functioned as a form of national propaganda by aligning linguistic traits with the social values of the emerging British state.

The historical policing of pronunciation in 18th- and 19th-century Britain is traced by **Massimo Sturiale** by first contextualizing how regional accents were socially charged, then turning his focus to early prescriptive works

which constructed a linguistic hierarchy in ‘proper’ pronunciation till the publication of 19th-century newspapers and periodicals. These contributed to extend prescriptive ideologies to a wider public, naturalising linguistic norms through humour, commentary and complaint. Drawing on a corpus of editorials, advertisements and letters to the editor, Sturiale highlights how the press functioned as both a conduit and a creator of metadiscourses on speech. In addition, the author shows that standard language ideologies were not solely imposed from above, but were also reproduced and contested by the reading public. Pronunciation therefore underscores the role of accent in structuring social inclusion and exclusion.

Christina Samson’s contribution focuses on propaganda at a time when in the 1800s it was still considered to have a positive meaning and an educational role while having a persuasive influence on the formation of public opinion. More specifically, Samson analyses a corpus of private letters written by English women during the sepoy uprisings in India. Through a quantitative approach integrated with discourse analysis, the study highlights how the letters were not only re-contextualised when published in the press, but how they also acquired different functions. On the one hand, the writers conveyed factual details of the events they experienced, thus challenging the stereotypical image of passive Victorian women without any personal opinions; on the other hand, all evaluations and recurring phraseology contributed to views of the Indians as the ‘other’, the enemy to be fought. The frequent publication of such letters in the press contributed to enforce a sense of belonging to an English ‘Us’ group while simultaneously leading the way to the initial forms of propaganda.

Matylda Włodarczyk investigates the representation of intellectual women in 19th-century Polish periodicals, with a particular focus on the term ‘bluestocking’ (‘educated, intellectual woman’) and its French (*bas bleu*) and German (*Blaustrumpf*) counterparts, as well as their Polish loan translations (*niebieska/błękitna pończocha/pończoszka*). By adopting an integrated approach that combines evaluation theory, the socio-pragmatics of code-switching and discursive othering, Włodarczyk shows that portrayals of intellectual women often relied on strategies of othering, presenting them in a seemingly light-hearted or humorous way while subtly conveying critical undertones. This ambivalence, along with occasional wit and humour, reflects broader social attitudes and functions as a form of propaganda, aiming to shape perceptions of women in male-dominated public and intellectual spheres and reinforcing male hegemony. The representations also intersect with broader nationalistic ideologies, including xenophobia.

Gabriella Del Lungo and Sabrina Cappelli deal with biographies that helped disseminate the main principles of colonial ideology at a time when England was still at the centre of modern imperial history and the colonised were seen as receiving the benefits of civilisation. More specifically, Del Lungo and Cappelli analyse Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria* (1921) by combining a corpus-assisted analysis with a qualitative analysis. Their aim is to highlight how specific keywords and expressions relate to British imperial propaganda discourse based on white superiority. The findings reveal how Strachey establishes and promotes an imperialism based also on matriarchal governance, not only by focusing on Queen Victoria's personality and anecdotes, but also by depicting her changing political status from Princess to Empress of India. In this way, the biographer enables his readers to identify and support this extension of Victoria's domestic female identity to the empire while disclosing the ways in which nationalism propaganda pervaded British society at the end of the 19th century.

Daide Mazzi examines patterns of discourse strategies used in two major propaganda publications during the Irish Civil War (1922-1923) – *Poblacht na hÉireann* and *The Free State*. By adopting the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis and by drawing upon Walton's (1997) framework for the investigation of propaganda, the paper explores how these newspapers represented the opposing factions, questioned their moral credibility, and justified or advocated for their own actions as the right course for Ireland. Using the ICW_Corpus, Mazzi identifies the key rhetorical strategies employed to manipulate public opinion and secure support for the aims of each side'. The findings show that both publications used similar discursive techniques to frame the enemy negatively and present their own faction in a positive light, urging Irish citizens to align with their respective causes. The study concludes that, while not always deceptive, propaganda strategically presents information to advance a political agenda, shaping public perceptions of historical events and figures.

The discursive construction of propaganda in American mass media is examined by **Birte Bös** through a diachronic, corpus-assisted analysis of *TIME* magazine (1923-2006). Focusing on metadiscursive uses of the term 'propaganda', the study uses the TIME Magazine Corpus alongside COCA, COHA and lexical databases to trace core meanings of 'propaganda' and related terms. Keyword and collocation analyses reveal that, despite its typically negative connotation, in *TIME* 'propaganda' displays pragmatic flexibility, shifting in response to socio-political contexts. In fact, its usage peaks during wartime and declines in the early 21st century, with terms like

'manipulation', 'lobbying' and 'public relations' gaining prominence. Bös develops a semantic-functional model to map the term's conceptual field, incorporating rhetorical strategy, communicative framing, informational quality and intended effect. The study underscores the historical contingency of propaganda as a concept and illustrates how Western media subtly reframe ideological persuasion as legitimate communication over time.

Roberta Facchinetti explores the linguistic and pragmatic strategies used by English-language broadcast journalists when interviewing diplomats, focusing on how interviewers balance impartiality with adversarialness. Using a subset of the InterDiplo Corpus – ten interviews with male diplomats by male and female UK-based journalists – the study combines quantitative analysis of question types with qualitative discourse-pragmatic interpretation. Closed questions dominate (53.6%), challenging the norm of open, impartial inquiry. Gender-based differences are evident: male journalists tend to use adversarial strategies, such as rhetorical or negative-interrogative questions, overlaps and assertive statements, while female journalists employ prefatory statements citing external data or prior comments to reduce confrontation. Both groups deviate from journalistic ideals by embedding presuppositions and factual framing within questions. The study reveals a tension between professional norms and the rhetorical demands of confrontational journalism, suggesting that interviewer stance reflects strategic and pragmatic choices as much as journalistic principles.

Marina Bondi, Jessica Jane Nocella and Roberto Paganelli conduct a diachronic analysis of British parliamentary discourse on vaccines from the early 19th century to the Covid-19 pandemic, combining corpus-assisted discourse analysis with health communication research. Using data from the Hansard Corpus (1803-2005) and the ParlaMint 2.1 corpus (2020-2021), the study applies keyword analysis, collocational patterns and semantic preference analysis via AntConc to trace evolving representations of vaccines. Four historical peaks in debate correspond to shifts in public health priorities and epistemic trust. Discourse transitions from early concerns over vaccine reliability to mid-20th century emphasis on prevention and credibility, followed by a late-century focus on side effects, misinformation and economic issues. The Covid-19 phase is characterised by an unprecedented use of promotional language, emotional appeals and nationalistic rhetoric to counteract vaccine hesitancy and support government policies. The study illustrates the strategic role of political discourse in shaping public perceptions of scientific authority and highlights the increasing integration of evaluative and affective language in parliamentary debates on health crises.

Finally, ageist propaganda is investigated by **Isabel Ermida** though the analysis of mock politeness strategies in online news comments posted to reply to articles on age-related topics, drawn from the NETLANG hate speech corpus on the *Daily Mail* website. By combining corpus tools with a qualitative approach, Ermida focuses on four politeness strategies – thanking, complimenting, agreeing and apologizing – and examines whether they are used insincerely, masking ageist intentions. The findings confirm that these strategies often appear polite on the surface but are used to express prejudiced views, revealing a two-phase process: an initial appearance of politeness, followed by a shift to more overtly disrespectful language. The study highlights how politeness strategies, when used manipulatively, create a mismatch between their surface meaning and the underlying harmful content, thus amplifying the negative impact of ageist rhetoric.

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