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# **Propaganda in *TIME Magazine* – A diachronic corpus-assisted discourse study**

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## ABSTRACT

While propaganda has been considered an age-old phenomenon, its conceptualisations differ historically and culturally. This contribution explores how the concept of propaganda is constructed in American news discourse, drawing on the *TIME Magazine Corpus* (1923-2006). The study adopts the approach of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies, combining corpus-linguistic methods with the more qualitatively oriented perspectives of (Critical) Discourse Analysis. Bringing together academic perspectives and mass media discourse about propaganda as exemplified by *TIME*, the study delineates key components of propaganda and tests (near-)synonyms, which shape the conceptual field of propaganda. The results indicate that, though negative connotations prevail, the semantic prosody and discourse prosody of propaganda are more variable than often acknowledged in both lay and expert definitions. Quantitative developments show a decreasing usage of the labels investigated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, hinting at changing metadiscursive practices in *TIME*.

Keywords: *TIME Magazine*, corpus-assisted discourse studies, conceptual field of propaganda.

## **1. Introduction**

The nature of propaganda has been described as ‘chameleonic’ and difficult to capture (e.g. Liu 2020: 5). The study at hand approaches this slippery concept with a corpus-assisted study of discourse about propaganda in the weekly *TIME Magazine*, which was launched in 1923 and soon became “the most influential newsmagazine in the United States” (*Encyclopædia Britannica*,

s.v. *TIME*). *TIME* has not only set standards for other news publications of this kind, but it is also an important player in reflecting and shaping public discourse.

Drawing on the *TIME Magazine Corpus* (henceforth *TIME*), I focus particularly on the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which has been described as the ‘age of propaganda’ (Cunningham 2002: 1), and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As outlined below, this study takes a metalinguistic perspective, investigating propaganda discourse, while the focus is not (or only secondarily) on the propaganda practices employed by the magazine itself.

Section 2 provides more detailed information on data and methods. After that, I will take two steps towards defining the core concept of propaganda: Section 3 draws on academic perspectives and compiles a set of recurring key components in definitions and descriptions of propaganda. Section 4 takes a corpus-assisted approach, using references to *propagand\** as access points to conceptualisations of propaganda in *TIME*. This core concept is complemented in section 5 by a range of (near-)synonyms which form the broader conceptual field of propaganda. Sections 6 and 7 provide insights into the diachronic developments of the core term and the related labels. The conclusion in section 8 discusses potential reasons for certain trends, particularly the overall decrease of references to propaganda in *TIME*.

## 2. Data and methods

The main data for this study is provided by the *TIME* corpus, which covers the period from 1923–2006 and contains ca. 275,000 articles, all in all more than 100 million words. In the analysis, I draw on the free online interface offered by Davies (2007), which has provided the basis for a variety of diachronic corpus-linguistic studies (e.g. Łodej 2021).

This study adopts the approach of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), combining corpus-linguistic methods with the more qualitatively oriented perspectives of (Critical) Discourse Analysis (Ancarno 2020, Partington et al. 2013). The basis is provided by a search of the core term *propagand\**, which yields 5,928 hits in *TIME*. Concordance patterns and collocates (within four words on either side of the node) allow for insights into the discursive construction of key components of propaganda. They also function as signposts for the identification of semantically and functionally related labels (cf. Bös 2015).

In addition to these findings and the results provided by the synonym search function in *TIME*, the domain of propaganda is further explored by investigating the use of (near-) synonyms suggested in the Historical Thesaurus of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), *Merriam-Webster Thesaurus* and *Powerthesaurus* (hyperlinked in *TIME*), as well as the word sketch option of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA, Davies 2008). Testing their use in *TIME* made it possible to identify further potentially relevant labels and refine the corpus-specific set of semantically and functionally related terms. This approach thus helps to shed more light on the semantic prosody of the concept and the discourse prosody of passages dealing with propaganda in *TIME* (cf. Baker et al 2008: 278; Stubbs 2001: 65).

Quantitative developments in the use of *propagand*\* and related labels in *TIME* are sketched by drawing on the normalised results for the decades provided by the Charts function. For the larger picture, I also draw on the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA, Davies 2010). Qualitative observations rest on the expanded context or, where that proves too limited, the respective articles provided in the archive of *TIME Magazine*.

### 3. Defining the core concept of propaganda I: Academic perspectives

Used by laypersons in private discourse, news workers in public media discourse, and researchers in different academic fields, across different times and cultures, the term *propaganda* is notoriously fuzzy. Yet, there are some aspects which many (though not all) of the conceptualisations seem to share. Starting out from a non-specialist definition provided in a randomly selected modern dictionary of English, many of these features are already hinted at. The *Macmillan Dictionary* defines *propaganda* as “information, especially false information, that a government or organization spreads in order to influence people’s opinions and beliefs” (s.v. *propaganda*), highlighting the potential lack of accuracy, the institutional frame and the major communicative function of persuasion. Considering these aspects alongside further definitions (such those in the OED; *Encyclopædia Britannica*; Artz 2020; Hyzen 2021; Steinfatt 2017) and the summaries provided by Corner (2007: 674-675), Cunningham (2002: 176-178) and Oddo (2018: 16-21), a common set of key components emerges (see Tab. 1).

Taken together, these key components explain the negative load the term has widely acquired. However, not all of the aspects mentioned have remained uncontested in academic discussions. Particularly the question

whether lying is necessarily a key component of propaganda has long been debated. For example, Oddo (2018: 3) maintains that it is “wrong to assume that propaganda always lies. Some does, but much propaganda is difficult to classify as true or false. [...] Other propaganda appears to be factual”. Cunningham (2002: 13) emphasises that “propaganda and its strategists sometimes lie and distort, but they prefer to use facts and truths as much as possible because it is generally far more effective in convincing others” (see also Ellul’s 1965 classic definition).

Table 1. Key components in conceptualisations of propaganda

Communicative frame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– institutional addressors (parties, organisations)</li> <li>– systematic/organised nature</li> <li>– mass mediated practices</li> </ul>
Quality and quantity of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– lies</li> <li>– strategic selectivity</li> </ul>
Sourcing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– covertness</li> </ul>
Rhetorical strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– emotionalisation</li> <li>– exaggeration</li> </ul>
Purposes and effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– persuasion, manipulation</li> <li>– antidemocratic intentions (serving the addressors, harmful for others)</li> </ul>

Likewise, the negative connotation of the term needs qualification. Research on historical developments and culture-specific usages of the term points to neutral and positive connotations of the term, which were not only linked to its original, religious usage in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but preserved well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The term started to gain an increasingly negative load in WWI in the Anglo-American context. Yet, *propaganda* retained a positive connotation as an official term for political agitation processes “in contexts where highly defined doctrinal truths [were] advanced” (Corner 2007: 670), e.g. the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, the GDR and China (cf. also Liu 2020: 10). Furthermore, researchers have drawn attention to manifestations of propaganda in areas other than politics, e.g. advertising, religion and education (cf. Steinfatt 2017). Indeed, particularly the nexus of propaganda and marketing has long been under discussion (e.g. McGarry 1958).

Thus, there were attempts to redefine the term in broader, more neutral and less normative ways. For example, Zienkowski (2021: 6) views propaganda as “those multimodal language games where social groups, organizations and networks perform discursive practices that introduce,

reproduce, change and/or disarticulate articulatory practice(s) and discourses with varying degrees of reflexivity". Yet, reconceptualisations of this kind have also been viewed critically:

Such an attempt to provide the term with a value-free, descriptive meaning not only faces the challenge of cancelling its intensive history of negative association, it also risks extending the category too far for its analytic good (Corner 2007: 671),

as it might strongly overlap with other communicative practices.

Concluding, academic sources provide a multi-faceted view on propaganda. Their perspectives will be complemented by those expressed in written mass media discourse, as exemplified by *TIME*, in the next section.

#### **4. Defining the core concept of propaganda II: Corpus-assisted approach**

While the label *propaganda* as such is, of course, metalinguistic in nature, denoting certain communicative activities, the focus of this first step in the corpus analysis is on those more or less explicit metalinguistic passages involving the term *propaganda* which allow for basic insights into how the core features of propaganda are discursively constructed in *TIME*. As the examples will show, there is evidence of both the conceptions of the news workers themselves, but also of the people whose voices are represented in the actual news discourse, typically politicians or other public figures, thus reflecting broader hegemonic societal notions. They are complemented by the occasional letter to the editor expressing readers' opinions. In general, it can be assumed that the conceptualisations of propaganda in *TIME* reflect a Western (US) stance, except explicitly indicated otherwise.

In order to elicit relevant data from the corpus, the following concordance patterns proved particularly fruitful, even though they required a certain amount of manual sifting: ADJ *propaganda*, is (not) *propaganda/propaganda* is, *propagand\** N, and coordinated noun phrases (N CONJ *propaganda*; *propaganda* CONJ N), which are, for example, used to express contrasts between propaganda and other concepts. Additionally, I used the term *propaganda* itself as a collocate of *propagand\**. This not only yielded a tautology indicating a certain tacit understanding as to what propaganda is (*Propaganda is propaganda*, 1945/04/30), but also signposted more elaborate metalinguistic passages or even complete articles discussing the nature of propaganda.

#### 4.1 Explicit definitions and metalinguistic negotiations of propaganda

Two of the articles extracted serve as a starting point here, as they provide explicit definitions of the concept which resonate with the key components outlined in section 3. In “What Is Propaganda?” (1923/09/10), *propaganda* is contrasted with *legitimate publicity*. Here, an initial definition foregrounds the veracity and benign purposes of *legitimate publicity*, which is juxtaposed with the persuasive force and one-sided advantages for the addressor in the case of *propaganda* (ex. 1). Then, a second attempt at a definition additionally highlights the element of overt sourcing for the distinction of legitimate publicity from propaganda (ex. 2).

- (1) “**Legitimate publicity**’ is the spreading of truthful information, or facts, about any cause or condition which is of interest or importance to people generally, and not for the pecuniary or other advantage of the person spreading it.

“**Propaganda**’ is the giving out (or hiring of) opinions, arguments, or pleas to induce people generally to believe what some individual, group of individuals or organizations want them to believe, for the pecuniary or other advantage of the individual, group or organization giving out (or hiring) the propaganda. (1923/09/10)

- (2) “Would not a sounder definition be:

“**Legitimate publicity**’ is the spreading of truthful information, or facts, about any cause or condition which is of interest or importance to people generally – provided that it is made plain who is responsible for distributing the information and who is financing its distribution, together, of course, with details as to the amount of money spent and the methods by which it is expended.” (1923/09/10)

Further arguments provided in the article suggest that propaganda might become acceptable when responsibility is taken for the message and discuss the relationship of government and press. This is also an important aspect in “The Great War on Words” (1985/09/09), published almost 60 years later (see extract, ex. 3).

- (3) In the Soviet Union, where ideas, like almost everything else, are controlled by the state, the word is **propaganda**. In the U.S., Government officials prefer to talk of “**public diplomacy**,” a term less offensive to free-speech sensibilities. But however they describe it,

both superpowers are engaged in an all-out war of words and images aimed at winning hearts and minds around the globe.

**Propaganda** – the methodical spreading of information to influence public opinion – can take many forms, from a government-approved interview in *Pravda* to a carefully couched answer at a Washington press conference, from a story planted in a foreign newspaper to a State Department white paper. The line between manipulating mass opinion and enunciating policy, between **p.r. posturing** and **legitimate diplomacy**, can be shadowy indeed. Most official declarations, be they from the Kremlin or the White House, have a mixed purpose. (1985/09/09)

This article does not only critically discuss the blurry boundaries of legitimate governmental communication and propaganda, it also draws attention to another problematic issue: the different construal of essentially the same communicative practices in an ‘us vs. them’ perspective, which is also reflected in the use of different labels. Accordingly, *propaganda* is typically employed with regard to opponents’ activities, carrying a clear negative connotation, whereas the use of more neutral terms such as *public relations* is associated with euphemistic self-reference (but see section 5.2).

While this differentiated usage is not only characteristic of Cold War rhetoric, but has also been described as typical of current discourse (e.g. Hyzen 2021: 3480), the use of *propaganda* in reference to systematic mass manipulation performed by the political enemy already emerged during WWI. Propaganda campaigns of the Germans were heavily criticised, while Americans learned only later that the Committee on Public Information had likewise indoctrinated them with propaganda tactics (Oddo 2018: 14), as also critically discussed retrospectively in *TIME*.

## 4.2 Discursive constructions of basic properties of propaganda

### *Communicative frame*

Further corpus evidence substantiates the key components outlined in Tab. 1. The institutional frame and organised nature of propaganda is, for example, reflected by the frequent use of the compound *propaganda campaign*, with 85 instances the second-most frequent *propagand\** N combination, followed by the metaphorical *propaganda machine* (61 tokens, also used in reference to major propagandists), *propaganda ministry* (46 hits) and *propaganda line* (33 instances). Premodifying adjectives such as *political* and *(anti-)religious*

hint at major domains, the list of collocates of *propaganda* at major agents representing parties or organisations.

The hits also allow for some insights into the oscillating connotations of *propaganda*. Whereas it has been claimed that “[f]ollowing the Great War, attempts to reclaim a positive meaning for “propaganda” largely failed” (Oddo 2018: 14), there are, for example, instances from the time of WWII which are used in relatively neutral ways in self-reference. This is illustrated by ex. (4) relating to the *brain of the foreign propaganda division* of the overseas branch of the Office of War Information.

- (4) The board’s job is to sift the vast portfolio of U.S. Government information on domestic and foreign events, pass it on to the operations division in the form of directives that fix the **U.S. propaganda line** for each country. (1942/10/12)

Even examples from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as the extract from a letter to the editor in ex. (5), still display a neutral usage, which in this particular case additionally illustrates the fluid boundaries of political and commercial interests also addressed in attempts at broader definitions outlined in section 3.

- (5) Another possibility is launching a **propaganda campaign**. If every television show had a 30-sec. piece featuring empty U.S. factories, Chinese goods just might stop flying off the shelves. (2005/12/18)

Ex. (5) also refers to one of the important channels of propaganda as mass-mediated practices, *television*. Further *propagand\** N combinations, such as *propaganda leaflet(s), pamphlet(s), magazine(s), poster(s), picture(s), play(s), broadcast(s), film(s)* and *movie(s)*, give evidence of the growing array of media formats and channels for the distribution of propaganda. Under the label *gadget propaganda* an even more extensive list of effective carriers of propaganda to be employed by the Office of War Information is spelled out (ex. 6).

- (6) **Gadget Propaganda.** **Propaganda** is also magazines, movies, handbills, leaflets for bombers to drop, soap, matches, shoelaces, games, puzzles, gadgets of all sorts, packaged to carry a message. [...] A leaflet – or a package of matches – is physical evidence that the U.S. is there. (1942/10/12)

Again, *propaganda* is used neutrally here. Thus, the term is not thoroughly negatively connotated, even though it has a negative load in the majority of the cases.

***Quality and quantity of information***

The data elicited from the corpus provide substantial evidence regarding the deceptive quality of propaganda. Often truth and facts are juxtaposed with propaganda (ex. 7, 8).

- (7) no verbosity, no **propaganda**, no distortion, just the **truth** and **facts** (1923/10/08)
- (8) With his usual mixture of **truth** and **propaganda**, he [Hitler, BB] argued that: [...] (1944/01/10)

Occasionally, premodification by *false* additionally highlights the inaccuracy of propaganda. However, as also indicated in the academic discussions, lying is not necessarily considered an obligatory element of propaganda. In Ex. (9) *TIME* cites a passage from *FORTUNE*, where the role of the democratic press in wartime is discussed. The juxtaposition of censorship and propaganda also addresses both issues of quality and quantity of information, adding yet another component to the intertwined nature of news and propaganda as mass-mediated practices.

- (9) “The one hard and indisputable fact about  **censorship**  is that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, to be said in its favor. It is a deliberate retrogression, an admission of defeat, temporary at least, in the ageless fight for freedom and truth... But whereas the case against censorship is overwhelming, there is a case for **propaganda – good propaganda**, of which the best is the truth... Democracy’s most potent weapon against all-out totalitarian warfare is, in the most practical sense, all-out truth. (1941/06/02)

Here, the term *propaganda* has a positive load and is explicitly linked to truthfulness, which makes propaganda an acceptable practice in democratic contexts.

***Sourcing***

The aspect of accuracy is closely related to that of sourcing. While subtlety and underhandedness are constructed as elements of successful propaganda (ex. 10, 11) and contrasted with *blatant propaganda*, the notion of *black propaganda* furthermore emphasises the combination of falsehood and covertness (cf. Hyzen 2021: 3487). Ex. (12) makes reference to the internet as the newest medium of not only spreading, but also effectively disguising sources of disinformation.

- (10) The **best propaganda** is always subtle, apparently uncontrolled. (1938/02/23)
- (11) The secret of a **good propaganda agency** is not to be caught **propagandizing**. (1945/06/11)
- (12) This makes the Net a powerful yet dangerous tool, Pavlovsky remarked recently. Through it, he explains, **black propaganda** can easily be “laundered” into “white” press reports.

In contrast, references to *official propaganda* clearly indicate an institutional frame and are typically associated with totalitarian systems.

### *Rhetorical strategies*

Discourse surrounding the search item *propagand\** also provides insights into the rhetorical strategies associated with propaganda. Ex. (13) hints at strategies of emotionalisation and their effects; ex. (14) emphasises exaggeration, which is also linked to inaccuracy; and ex. (15) contrasts propagandistic emotionalisation strategies with the plain and concrete nature of a speech by Eisenhower.

- (13) “to counteract the inspired propaganda which has created mass war hysteria throughout the Nation by inflaming the fears and passions of our people.” (1939/08/28)
- (14) they “absorb the most exaggerated and false propaganda” (1950/02/06)
- (15) Eisenhower’s remarks were not particularly eloquent, and invoked no propagandistic emotions: they were in West Point English, basic, clear, specific. (1960/10/03)

Furthermore, premodification by adjectives such as *aggressive* hints not only at the highly emotional, but also methodical and forceful nature of propaganda.

### *Purposes and effects*

Propaganda is often constructed as intentional, e.g. by patterns such as *deliberate propaganda* or *propaganda ploy*, the latter of which also draws attention to the elements of persuasion/manipulation serving the addressor and a tendency towards covertness. A broad range of adjectives expressing more or less explicit moral evaluation further highlights aspects of

manipulation and harmfulness, e.g. *bitter, effective, evil, hostile, inflammatory, malicious, negative, shameless, subversive, vicious, virulent*.

However, there are also combinations with *democratic*, which show once more that the concept was not (yet) necessarily negatively connotated (ex. 16).

(16) Hitlerian Germany, Fascist Italy and Communist Russia forbid democratic propaganda in their lands. (1938/11/07)

(17) The official G.I. guide to Germany tells U.S. doughboys how to deal with skeptical Germans. When a German says: "It is all a lie, all democratic propaganda," the G.I.'s officially approved answer is: "Okay, chum, you'll find out soon enough." (1945/10/28)

Yet, while ex. (16) implies that it was acceptable for non-totalitarian systems to have propaganda, which is used neutrally in this representation of the US perspective, the construction could also evoke negative associations, as illustrated by ex. (17), a hypothetical quote by the German enemy insinuating falsehood, which the American G.I. is trained to counter.

Concluding, *TIME* discourse involving the search item *propagand\** often corroborates the key components postulated as characteristic of the concept. However, there is also evidence of metalinguistic negotiations of the concept, whose connotations are more variable than frequently assumed. Furthermore, the examples already hint at a rich array of closely related concepts, which will be approached more systematically in the next section.

## 5. Broadening the perspective: Identifying related concepts

### 5.1 Compiling an inventory of (near-)synonyms

Going beyond the label *propaganda* itself, this study also considers terms denoting potentially related concepts. For a first categorisation, the Historical Thesaurus of the *OED* serves as a starting point. It classifies *propaganda* (s.v., sense 2, 3) under the headings *the mind* » *will* » *motivation* » *persuasion*. Again, this path highlights the purposes and effects which were carved out as major components of propaganda above. Further, more comprehensive sets of (near-)synonyms are compiled in Tab. 2. They include information from the *Merriam-Webster Thesaurus* and the *Powerthesaurus*, which is hyperlinked by *TIME*, as well as the results of the *COCA* word sketch and *TIME* synonym

search. In line with the CADS approach, the terms suggested were then tested in *TIME*. This resulted in a refined set, which was partly narrowed down and partly extended by further relevant concepts.

Table 2. Overview of potentially relevant (near-)synonyms of *propaganda*<sup>1</sup>

Synonyms suggested	<i>Merriam-Webster</i> (top two relevance levels)	<i>Power-thesaurus</i>	<i>COCA</i> word sketch	<i>TIME</i> (= <i>propaganda</i> )	Corpus-assisted compilation
<i>ad(vertising), ad(vertisement)</i>	<b>XX</b>	X	<b>XX</b>	X	w/ modification
<i>agitprop</i>		X			X
<i>announcement</i>	X	X			
<i>ballyhoo</i>	X	X			x
<i>bias</i>					w/ modification
<i>brainwashing</i>		X			X
<i>brochure</i>	X				
<i>buildup</i>	X		X	X	
<i>bulletin</i>	X				
<i>bumf</i>				X	
<b><i>campaign</i></b>	<b>X</b>				<b>w/ modification</b>
<i>cant</i>				X	x
<i>circular</i>	X				
<i>communication</i>	X				
<i>communiqué</i>	X				
<i>diplomacy</i>					X
<b><i>disinformation</i></b>		X	<b>X</b>	X	<b>X</b>
<i>demagoguery</i>					X
<i>doctrine</i>		X			X
<i>fake news</i>					x
<i>flyer</i>	X				
<i>hoax</i>					x
<i>hoopla</i>			X	X	x
<i>hype</i>		X	X	X	x
<i>information</i>		X	X	X	

<sup>1</sup> In Tab. 2, the (near-)synonyms are represented by nouns. However, the corpus search also included other potential word forms where relevant (e.g. *brainwash\**).

<b>indoctrination</b>		X	X	X	<b>X</b>
<i>lies</i>		X			X
<i>literature</i>			X	X	
<i>lobbying</i>					X
<i>manipulation</i>					X
<i>marketing</i>			X	X	
<i>message</i>	X				
<b>misinformation</b>			<b>X</b>	X	<b>X</b>
<i>news management</i>					X
<i>newspeak</i>		X			X
<i>notification</i>	X				
<i>outreach</i>					x
<i>persuasion</i>					w/ modification
<i>plug</i>	X				
<i>populism</i>					X
<i>poster</i>	X				
<i>posting</i>	X				
<i>promo(tion)</i>	X	X			
<i>pronouncement</i>	X				
<i>proselytism, proselytizing</i>		X			X
<b>publicity</b>	<b>X</b>	X	X	X	<b>X</b>
<i>public relations</i>					X
<i>puffery</i>			X	X	x
<i>release</i>	X				
<i>report</i>	X				
<i>rhetoric</i>					X

In Tab. 2, bold type marks (near-)synonyms positioned as highly relevant, as indicated by multiple mentions and/or the respective classification in the sources. Lowercase x signifies terms of minor relevance in *TIME*, with generally low frequencies and/or many false hits. Grey marks the labels excluded from further consideration. This comprises terms which are semantically too broad (e.g. *communication, information*) or too ambiguous (e.g. *plug*). Synonyms such as *ad(vertisement), marketing, promo(tion)* indicate an overlap of political and commercial domains which was also pointed out in

the more comprehensive definitions of propaganda. Some of those broader terms were tested in more detail, but with modifying elements to improve precision (e.g. *political advertising*, *media bias*, *political persuasion*), all of which proved relevant, but not particularly frequent. Other terms not considered further are items relating to potential media formats of propaganda, most of which were suggested by the *Merriam-Webster Thesaurus* (e.g. *bulletin*, *circular*).

## 5.2 Mapping out the conceptual field of propaganda

Clearly, none of the terms suggested as synonyms in thesauri and academic works and identified in corpus-assisted research are completely identical with *propaganda*. Yet, as Fig. 1 visualises, they can be mapped out in a semantic-functional field which shows that, typically, the terms foreground particular key components of propaganda.

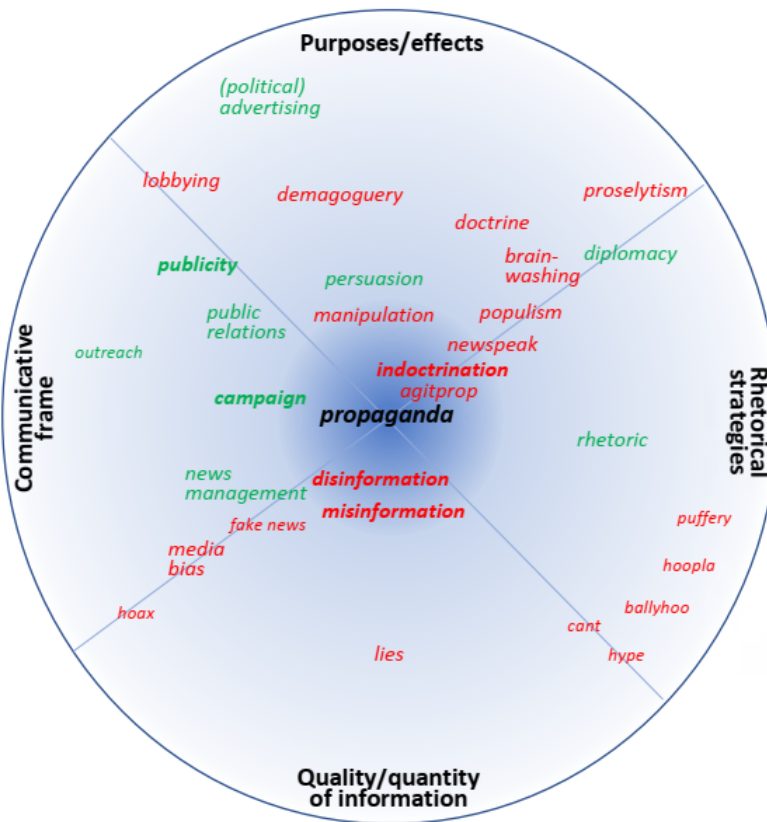


Figure 1. The conceptual field of propaganda

Fig. 1 contains the refined set of 30 terms constituting the conceptual field of propaganda identified in *TIME*. The core is provided by *propaganda* itself, the other labels are arranged concentrically around this core, drawing on four of the key components of propaganda which are highlighted in the respective labels: quality and quantity of information, purposes and effects, rhetorical strategies and communicative frame. The component of sourcing was not made explicit in any of the labels in the set, though it might often be implied. As Fig. 1 also illustrates, the semantics of the labels generally tends to oscillate and often displays overlap with the respective other key components.

Some of the labels as such bear a clear negative connotation (marked red), whereas others are at least superficially neutral (green). However, the actual semantic and discourse prosody can be different in specific contexts, as indicated by ex. (18) and (19). They both contain the compound *publicity campaign*, used neutrally in the first case and carrying a negative load in the second.

- (18) The Administration also launched a **publicity campaign**, featuring a specially drawn Snoopy cartoon, to get consumers to save energy. (1973/10/22)
- (19) This is obviously nothing more than a pre-presidential **publicity campaign** conducted at our expense. (1955/06/27)

The relatively neutral labels mainly relate to mass-mediated practices pursued in the legitimate communicative efforts of governments or organizations (cf. ex. 1). Yet, as already discussed above, what is acceptable and legitimate is not clear-cut and essentially a matter of perspectives. The observation that the more neutral labels (such as *public relations* or *outreach*) are typically reserved for “sympathetic ideas” (Hyzen 2021: 3480) and “acceptable persuasion” (Artz 2020: 1408) does not necessarily hold true for their use in *TIME*. Indeed, terms which might seem relatively objective on the surface level are actually used quite critically in many contexts, as ex. (20) indicates, which includes an explicit link to manipulation.

- (20) the Pentagon **manipulated** information to produce “one of the most stunning pieces of **news management** ever conceived.” (2003/06/09)

It is hardly surprising that particularly the labels referring to (a lack of) the quality and quantity of information carry a clear negative load. This is illustrated by ex. (21), a definition of *disinformation* provided by *TIME* as an entry in “a glossary of current spy terms, most of them used in the West

but some international” which demonstrates the semantic closeness of *disinformation* and *propaganda*.

- (21) **DISINFORMATION**: Spreading of **false propaganda** and forged documents to confuse counter-intelligence or create political unrest or scandals. (1971/10/11)

Likewise, the set of terms particularly relating to purposes and effects is predominantly negatively connoted. In addition to implying malignant intentions, many of them also hint at rhetorical strategies employed (ex. 22).

- (22) Yet sure enough, there was George Wallace [...], dispensing his own brand of sugar-sweet **demagoguery** in his first nationwide TV appeal. (1968/09/13)

Amongst those items highlighting rhetorical strategies, the noun *rhetoric*, itself neutral, often acquires a negative load by premodifying adjectives indicating a high degree of emotionalisation (such as *fiery*, *angry*, etc). More openly negative is the connotation in the cases of *ballyhoo*, *puffery*, *hoopla* and *hype*, which stress the rhetorical device of exaggeration commonly associated with propaganda (ex. 23).

- (23) Our own job, in a world that gets more complex all the time, is to sort out the essential from the transitory, to get to the bottom of conflicting claims, to pierce through the **propaganda** and the **puffery**, to try to get the facts right and to make the conclusions sound. (1961/11/24)

The overview shows that the (near-)synonyms identified tend to highlight selected, often overlapping facets shaping the conceptual field of propaganda. Yet, the frequency and distribution of the labels in the corpus differ both individually and diachronically, as will be demonstrated in the next sections.

## 6. Diachronic perspective I: Developments of *propagand\** through *TIME*

Propaganda has long captured the interest of laypersons and experts, and recently, a “return of propaganda as a contentious debate topic in both public and academic forums” (Hyzen 2021: 3479) was postulated. Here, I will test to what extent this is visible in the frequency and distribution of the core term *propagand\** across the nine decades covered in *TIME*. Fig. 2 provides in Fig. 2,

together with the results for the respective periods in *COHA* for comparison. This and the figures in section 7 (Fig. 3-7) draw on the normalised frequencies (per mil) displayed in the Chart function of the online corpora. The numbers in brackets indicate the total frequency of the search item in the respective corpus.

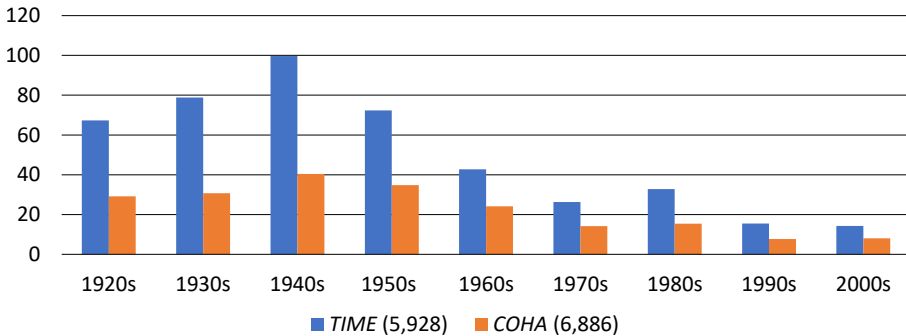


Figure 2. Distribution of *propagand\** in *TIME* and *COHA* (per mil)

Fig. 2 shows that across the decades, the normalised frequencies are lower in *COHA*, roughly half of those in *TIME*, which can be attributed to the broader range of genres covered in *COHA*. However, the overall pattern looks relatively similar: There is a peak in the 1940s, which, just like the second-highest frequency in the 1930s, can, of course, be explained by the political situation of WWII and particularly the fact that there were frequent references to official institutions and titles including the term *propaganda*, most notably the *Ministry/Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment* in the third Reich. These are interesting in so far as the connotations can be blurry, ranging from the neutral use of the official titles to a critical perspective on institutions and agents of enemy communication.

The frequencies in the 1920s and 1950s samples are relatively high as well. Yet, in the 1920s, the range of contents and communicative parties associated with propaganda is much broader than that in the 1950s. The earlier *TIME* sample includes, for example, references to *war* and *peace*, (*anti*-)religious, monarchist, nationalist, fascist, labor and socialist propaganda, ascribed to the Germans, British, Soviet Russians, but also various communicative parties within the US. In contrast, post-WWII references are clearly dominated by *communist*, *Soviet*, *Russian* and *Red* propaganda, complemented by some retrospection on *Nazi propaganda*.

Both corpora furthermore display a steady decrease of the term since the 1950s. The collocates of *propagand\** in *TIME* indicate that in the 1960s, the

focus on *communist* propaganda is still relatively strong, while it goes beyond *Soviet* agents, reflecting the spread of communism and resulting conflicts in other parts of the world, including Asia (Vietnam, China), Latin America (Cuba) and the Eastern Bloc. In the 1970s and 1980s, *communist* is no longer an important collocate, while *Soviet* gains traction again, particularly in the 1980s samples, which displays a mild increase in the frequency of *propagand\** related to increasing Cold War tensions. After that, explicit labelling of propaganda sinks again drastically, reaching an all-time low by the 2000s. Particularly the most recent corpus sample provides evidence of extended notions, e.g. *Wal-Mart's "corporate propaganda"* (2006/03/20).

Clearly, it is not surprising that the frequency and distribution of the key term in *TIME* reflects the socio-historical circumstances in the respective periods from a US-perspective. Rising particularly in times of war and conflict, the results indicate a strong focus on the political domain which constitutes the core of the narrower definitions. What remains to be seen is whether the recent decrease means that there is less public discourse about propaganda or that the label has simply been replaced by other, related terms.

## 7. Diachronic perspective II: Development of related labels

In this section, I will investigate some of the more frequent labels from Tab. 2. Yet, this endeavour has the caveat that, as pointed out above, many of the (near-)synonyms of *propaganda* are semantically quite broad or ambiguous, and thus, frequencies in *TIME* might be distorted by varying numbers of false hits. Sifting through the respective KWIC results has helped to estimate the relevance of the corpus hits. Additionally, precision was tested manually for three of the most frequent, broader terms (*lies\_n*, *manipulation*, *rhetoric\_n*), drawing on smaller test samples of 20 randomly selected hits per period (180 hits/label). The (tentative) quantitative developments of the selected terms are sketched in the next four sections, which cluster the results according to the key components highlighted by the respective labels. Here, the focus is on nouns or nominalised forms as potential descriptors of the concept, neglecting, for the time being, other parts of speech.

### 7.1 Quantity/quality of information

Fig. 3 includes three terms foregrounding the quality and quantity of information: *lies\_n*, *misinformation* and *disinformation*.

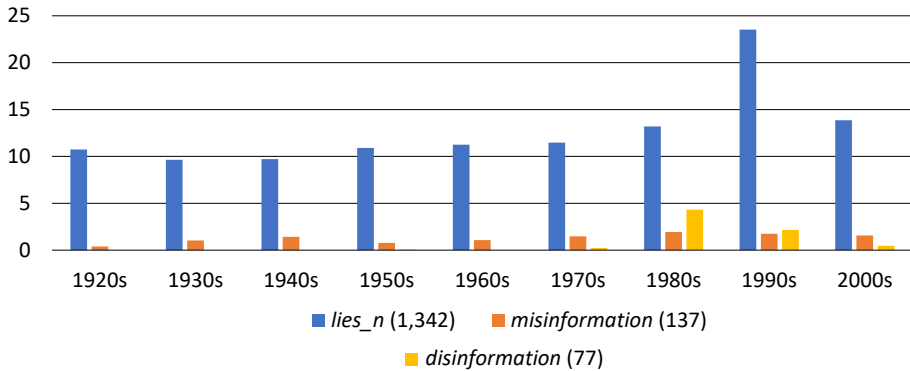


Figure 3. Terms highlighting the quality/quantity of information (per mil)

*Lies\_n* is the most frequent term in this category. Keeping in mind that this search item is semantically very broad, the KWIC results indicate that nevertheless many of these instances are relevant as conceptually close to propaganda. The test sample of 20 hits/period yields an overall precision of 38%. The relevance of the term is also supported by its collocates, which include *propaganda*. Ex. (24) illustrates its use as a descriptor from the conceptual field of propaganda, explicitly rating the effectiveness of lies.

- (24) The principle is this: every government, even that of the United States, lies always and about everything; when it can't lie on the main issue, it lies about the details. There are good **lies** and bad. Good ones are those that the middle class believes; excellent ones catch some of the carriage public; execrable ones are those nobody believes, and that only the most shameless ministries dare repeat. (1950/12/25)
- (25) He[Governor Roosevelt, BB] began with a slashing attack upon "certain great private utility corporations" for what he called their "systematic, subtle, deliberate and unprincipled **campaign** of **misinformation**, **propaganda**, **lies** and falsehood." (1932/10/03)

The evaluation expressed in ex. (25) gains intensity by listing a range of terms from the conceptual field of propaganda, which next to further synonyms emphasising a lack of veracity also include a reference to the systematic, organised nature of the *campaign* (cf. section 7.4). Among the former is the label *misinformation* which, like *disinformation*, is generally much less frequent in *TIME*. While *misinformation* includes a smaller number of irrelevant hits (e.g. relating to the medical domain), most of them prove relevant within

the conceptual field of propaganda. The tokens of *disinformation* are all relevant and cluster particularly in the 1980s, where they mainly, though not exclusively, refer to *Soviet disinformation*.

## 7.2 Purposes/effects

Terms focusing on purposes and effects of propaganda are summarised in two figures. Fig. 4a comprises the more frequent labels *lobbying\_n* and *manipulation*, which share certain tendencies in their development.

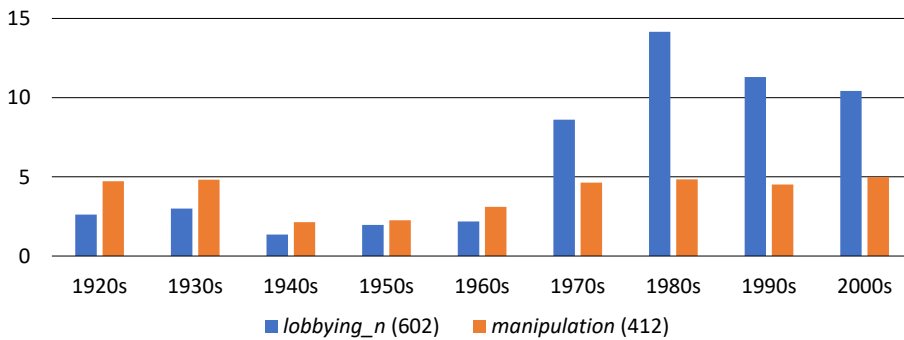


Figure 4a. Terms highlighting purposes/effects (per mil)

The term *lobbying\_n* was elicited from the corpus as a relevant search item. Particularly indirect lobbying has been associated with propaganda, sharing similarities regarding their impact on public opinion and advocacy efforts, as shown by ex. (26), which places *lobbying* explicitly in the vicinity of *propaganda*. In *TIME*, the term clearly gains prominence in the 1970s and remains relevant into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As *lobbying* is typically directed at the government, which in other cases often acts as the addressor, the term adds another facet to the conceptual field.

- (26) But he promised not to make a tender offer to stockholders unless the majority of McGraw-Hill's board approved the bid or at least agreed "not to oppose it by **propaganda, lobbying**, litigation or otherwise."  
(1979/02/12)

The term *manipulation* again has to be treated with more caution. KWIC and collocates indicate the relevance of the label, with *political* on rank 2 of the collocation list. The test sample yields an average degree of precision of 34.5%, with lower degrees in the early samples and higher precision in

the more recent examples (peaking in the 1990s with 60%). Irrelevant hits include particularly references to manipulation in the stock market, but also osteopathic and, more recently, genetic manipulation. Additionally, there is evidence of the overlap of political and economic domains covered in broader conceptualisations of propaganda, as illustrated by ex. (27).

(27) These ads give kids a look at the cynical **manipulation** behind the targeting of teens by tobacco-marketing campaigns. (2000/03/20)

Both terms, *lobbying* and *manipulation* show the fewest hits in the 1940s which contrasts with the peaks displayed in the usage of many of the other terms in that period.

Fig. 4b displays a second set of terms stressing manipulative force: *indoctrination*, *demagoguery* and *populism*. Here, the search results have a high degree of precision.

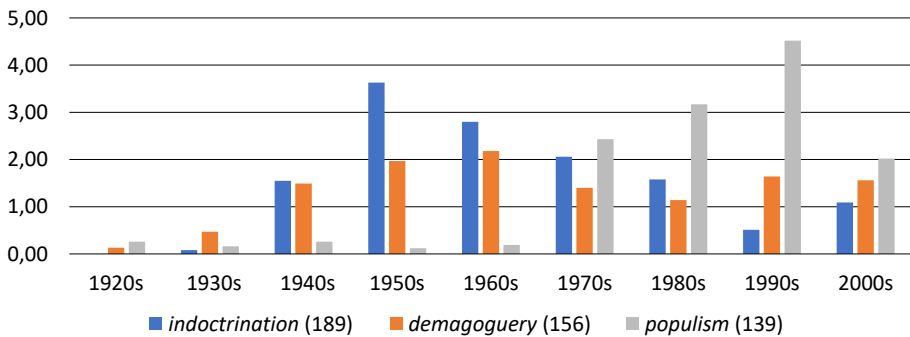


Figure 4b. Terms highlighting purposes/effects (per mil)

From the 1920s to the 1980s, *indoctrination* and *demagoguery* display a relatively similar distribution, with hardly any evidence before the 1940s and peaks in the 1950s and 1960s. After that, the former keeps on decreasing whereas the latter rises again. *Indoctrination* is closely associated with communism, while *demagoguery* often refers to US politics. Ex. (28) contrasts *demagoguery* with *principled opposition* and links it to *populism*. The close relationship between the two concepts is also shown in ex. (29).

(28) It illuminated a critical decision the Democrats now face – between principled opposition to the Bush Administration and **populist demagoguery** on the two main issues of this election, the war and the economy. (2003/09/15)

- (29) [...] the current political ferment of Eastern Europe is an inherently volatile mix in which old demons – belligerent nationalism and **demagogic populism** – could win out as easily as liberal democracy. (1990/08/06)

Mentions of *populism*, used in *TIME* almost exclusively in reference to US politics, have increased since the 1970s, however, decreasing again after a peak in the 1990s. The label also strongly hints at rhetorical strategies, evidence of which is further discussed in the next section.

### 7.3 Rhetorical strategies

Two of the more frequent labels foregrounding rhetorical strategies are *diplomacy* and the term *rhetoric\_n* itself. Though semantically broader, they display a substantial overlap with the core concept of *propaganda*. While *diplomacy* is found in higher, but variable numbers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *rhetoric\_n* starts becoming more frequent in the 1960s, peaking in the 1970s. Both terms display a similar decrease from the 1980s to the 2000s.

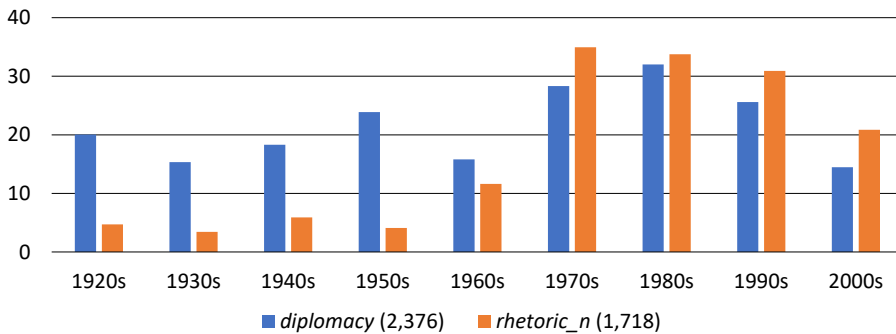


Figure 5. Terms highlighting rhetorical strategies (per mil)

The quantitative development might hint at Artz' (2020: 1409) observation that “[g]overnment propaganda has become more polished and coordinated, often appearing as public diplomacy”, which, he cautions, nevertheless still constitutes systematic attempts to control public opinion. Given this, the search results for *diplomacy* could not be classified for precision. Corpus evidence shows that while *diplomacy* often has neutral or even positive value, it also adopts negative connotations, as in ex. (30), which associates *diplomacy* with *demagoguery* and sees democracy endangered.

- (30) What was clear amid the **diplomacy** and **demagoguery** last week was that the other D word – democracy – had taken a serious hit. (2000/02/12)

In the case of *rhetoric\_n*, the test sample of 20 hits/period showed an average precision of 44%. The relevant hits usually display a negative semantic prosody and discourse prosody in *TIME*.

#### 7.4 Communicative frame

Fig. 6 compiles terms relating to elements of the communicative frame, especially the systematic, organised nature of mass-mediated practices.

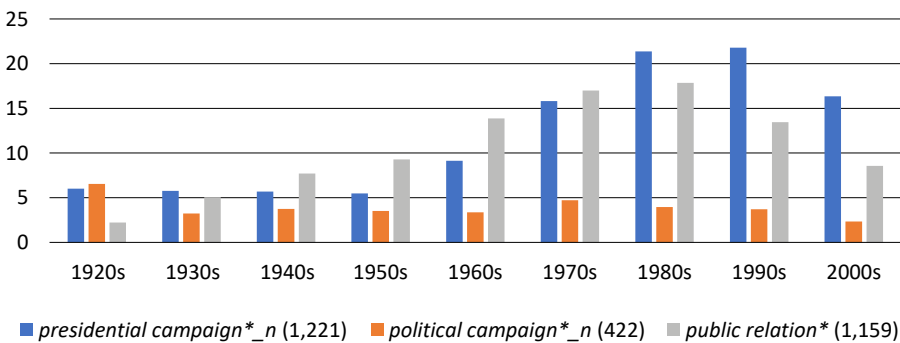


Figure 6. Terms highlighting elements of the communicative frame (per mil)

*Campaign* is among the top ten collocates of *propaganda* (rank 7), yet as the term as such is highly frequent (27,580 tokens), the top two ADJ *campaign\*\_n* combinations were selected for closer scrutiny: *presidential campaign* and *political campaign*. The former exerts a strong impact on the overall quantitative development of *campaign*, which clearly rises from the 1950s on, peaks in the 1990s and then falls again. However, as it constitutes a crucial element in the electoral process in democratic countries (even though it might be realised by illegitimate communicative practices), the label appears somewhat more marginal in the conceptual field of *propaganda*. The same is true, to a certain extent, for *political campaign*, which is generally less frequent and displays a milder, slightly wave-like development. It is often used neutrally, but also associated with practices viewed critically in *TIME*, bringing it closer to the core notion of *propaganda*.

*Public relation\** shows a wave-like development similar to that of *presidential campaign*, with a slightly earlier peak in the 1980s. In *TIME*, it

oscillates between the domains of politics, advertising and corporate communication. Ex. (31) fits the narrower conceptualisation of propaganda.

- (31) But it is bad history and worse **public relations** to pretend that Islam has always been pacific [...] (2002/12/23)

## 7.5 Recent trends

One of the most important trends emerging from the quantitative overview above is that, with only two exceptions, the labels tested demonstrate a more or less drastic decrease in the 2000s. The results thus seem to indicate a decreasing amount of discourse about propaganda in *TIME*. However, is that really the case or have new terms been introduced as descriptors of propagandistic phenomena in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Based on current public discourse, one could assume that *fake news* might be one such candidate. However, with 21 instances in total, the label is generally quite rare in *TIME*. And although there is a clear rise in the 2000s sample, which yields 18 of these instances, most of them actually only function as metalabels for headlines from the satirical *The Onion*. Indeed, a quick search in the *Corpus of News on the Web* (NOW, Davies 2016) indicates that *fake news* gained massive traction only in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, peaking in 2018.

Returning to *TIME*, the analysis so far has indicated that propaganda-related terms tend to increase in times of war and crisis. Based on socio-historical background knowledge regarding major conflicts of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, including e.g. the US war in Afghanistan, the 09/11 terrorist attacks and the Iraq War, but also domestic controversies such as those of the 2000 elections, some more search items were tested in *TIME* which allow for the identification of further, potentially relevant terms. So far, two tendencies have emerged, which are illustrated below by two examples, but require further systematic study.

On the one hand, the preliminary results indicate that conflicts seem to be executed more directly and openly, as indicated by an increase of the term *attack\*\_n* to a clear peak of 372.64 (per mil) in the 2000s. Though these include a number of irrelevant hits (e.g. *heart attack*; *military attack* in the literal sense), many of the 2000s instances have a political connotation bringing it close to the communicative purposes of propaganda, yet with a stronger element of coercion and lacking the clandestine nature often ascribed to *propaganda* (ex. 32).

- (32) Gore was hammering away at Bradley's health-care plan, as usual, and Bradley was sneering back at him, employing his recent tactic of responding to Gore **attacks** by pointing out their theatricality. (2000/01/17)

While this usage extends the spectrum of communicative practices, involving a further semantically broad term, there is also evidence of highly specific labels. For example, the use of *jihād*\* booms in the 2000s (37.96 per mil). Of course, this notion of the 'holy war' again goes beyond communicative activities. However, its closeness to the concept of propaganda is not only visible in the original contexts of spreading and defending the Islamic faith, but made particularly evident by its metaphorical usage, as in *the jihād of Cuban politics* (2000/04/10) or *junk-food jihāds* (2000/11/13).

## 8. Conclusions

As expectable, metadiscourse about propaganda in *TIME* reflects the socio-historical circumstances of the respective periods and the particular stance of the magazine. The use of the label *propagand*\* itself gives evidence of both narrow and broader conceptualisations as well as metalinguistic negotiations of basic properties, related and opposing notions. The results of this corpus-assisted discourse study show that, though negative connotations prevail, the semantic prosody and discourse prosody of propaganda is more variable than often acknowledged by both lay and expert definitions. Also, while the us-vs-them perspectives attested for other publications such as the *New York Times* (cf. Oddo 2018: 2) certainly also manifest themselves in *TIME*, there are also critical reflections on propagandistic practices in and by the US.

Method triangulation helped to map out the multi-faceted conceptual field of propaganda and its (near-)synonyms and elaborate on their diachronic development. While references to propaganda tend to increase in times of war and crisis, there is a remarkable overall decrease of the labels towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a time certainly not free from conflict. This is not just true for *propagand*\* itself, but also for most of the (near-)synonyms, including the (superficially) more neutral, euphemistic labels which particularly gained prominence in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the one hand, this could indicate that public discourse about propaganda has generally become less frequent in *TIME*. On the other hand, however, preliminary results suggest that the range of related terms has increased, providing evidence of overlapping semantic domains.

This includes both broader terms, which share some, but not all of the key components of propaganda, and very specific terms including a propagandistic facet. Yet, these require further testing in future research. Next steps in this project also include a more thorough Critical Discourse Analysis of a selected subset of the corpus data, which draws attention to the actors associated with propaganda and the activities ascribed to them.

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