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Sociology, Propaganda and Psychological Operations

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Sociology has less to say about propaganda than it should and much less than it used to. Why is this? Can anything be done about it? Answering the first question is tricky but I will review some of the evidence. Amongst this is the fact that sociological attention has been diverted from propaganda in part by a successful (propaganda?) campaign to create alternatives to the term propaganda.

On the second question, only time will tell. I want, however, to make an argument by example. I want to try and suggest that propaganda – or whatever we decide to call it – can and should be an important topic for sociologists to examine. There is no need to leave it to the historians, the political scientists or to media studies, and certainly not to the subject specialists of 'public relations'!

My approach to propaganda and psychological operations (psyops) springs directly from my appreciation of the wider problems of media power that were inculcated in me after I found the Media Group in the summer of 1985.

I fell eagerly on the material in *War and Peace News* (Broadbent et al. 1985), which described the way in which TV news reproduced and amplified government misinformation – on the bombing of Port Stanley, for example, and the way in which protest movements like the women at Greenham Common were traduced by 'objectivity' and 'balance'. My first opportunity to contribute to the work of the Media Group was in the analysis of state and private attacks on broadcasters via Norman Tebbit and the Media Monitoring Unit, which had a weak empirical, yet strong ideological, grasp on how the media actually performed in the context of such controversies as the 1985 US attack on Libya.

John Eldridge was always clear that there was more to media studies than simply analysing news 'discourse', a word I am not sure I ever heard him use. So it

came to pass that my own PhD research started with the media coverage of the SAS killings of three unarmed IRA volunteers in Gibraltar in March 1988 (Miller 1994). It was obvious in that case that the deluge of misinformation and falsehoods relayed by the press and TV were not just the product of pressures from within the media system. There was also pressure from without in the form of, firstly, intimidation, bullying and the strategic use of the law by the state and, secondly, (mis)information supplied by governmental institutions of organized persuasive communication. No-one at Glasgow warned me not to investigate government misdeeds directly. No-one said watch out, keep your investigations focused on media institutions, do not look at the government, the military, the police or the intelligence agencies. I didn't know that the encouragement I got in Glasgow was then, and remains now, a rare and very valuable commodity. Since then I have experienced discouragement and attempted discouragement on numerous occasions from colleagues, university bureaucracies and indeed from those who make their living managing public debate and decision-making in what Raymond Williams (1985:268) called the institutions of 'disinformation and distraction'.

The approach that is needed to understand the information strategies of government (and indeed of any organised actor) should not be mediacentric (Miller 1993; Schlesinger 1989) – that is, such an approach must see communications from the points of view of all those involved in the process not just the media (as much media studies continues to do) or indeed from the point of view only of the creators and authors of communicative strategies in government as seen via public records. It must be seen in terms of the wider set of intersections between different actors and audiences which comprise the 'circuit of mass communications' (Philo et al. 2015), itself a key part of the social totality. In other words, 'means of communication are themselves means of production' (Williams 1980:50). It is salutary to remember that no act of communication, from the utterance of an individual or its amplification via a megaphone, to leaflets, newspapers, books, films and indeed the internet and social media, leaps magically into existence from the force of our imaginations, but all such acts have social and material conditions of existence. As it is with communications media, so it is with 'propaganda'; with publicity, persuasion, advertising and marketing. It is very well known that the term propaganda originates from the creation in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV of Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (The Sacred

Society for the Propagation of the Faith). It is less often observed that the word applied to an organisation: 'One established a Propaganda', notes the British political scientist Terence Qualter (1985:108), 'to undertake certain activities'. As Qualter himself notes, but does not pursue, 'that usage has declined and is rarely met with today'. The Vatican's 'Propaganda Fide' changed its name in 1988, dropping the word propaganda and substituting 'evangelization'. Its official headquarters, however, remains in the Palazzo di Propaganda Fide, in Rome, and its mission to convert unbelievers, to 'propagate' the faith, is unchanged (Vatican 2015). The sense of propagating certain states of affairs makes the term propaganda superior to many of the alternative terms that were proffered after the term fell into disrepute in the twentieth century.

Propaganda and the symbolic

When we look back at the history of writing on propaganda from the 1920s on, what we find are mostly discussions only of the 'symbolic' dimensions of propaganda. According to Harold Lasswell in his classic 1927 study, 'Propaganda is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols.' Similarly Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1943:58) stated 'We understand by propaganda any and all sets of symbols which influence opinion, belief or action on issues regarded by the community as controversial. These symbols may be written, printed, spoken, pictorial or musical.' This definition has been long lasting – forming also the basis of Qualter's (1985:124) classic study some half a century later; the 'deliberate attempt by the few to influence the attitudes and behaviour of the many by the manipulation of symbolic communication.'

On the other hand, the classic accounts are worth re-reading, as John Eldridge (2007) shows in his short review of the work of Merton and Lazarsfeld. This is because they remind us both that several aspects of received wisdom on 'propaganda' are incorrect and because they help us to trace the process by which 'propaganda' was airbrushed from sociology (and social science) and from discussion in polite company more generally.

For example, the fact that 'propaganda' can be true was noted by Lazarsfeld and Merton. 'An authentic account of the sinking of American merchant ships in the

time of war … may prove to be effective propaganda inducing citizens to accept deprivations which they would not otherwise accept in good spirits' (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1943:58). Propaganda, in other words, is not only about lies or about the deceptive use of communications. It is important to remember this given later attempts, which we will review below, to pretend that 'our' activities are truthful and thus not like 'their' propaganda or 'psyops'.

The dispute over propaganda

The dispute over the term propaganda emerged strongly in the US after the First World War and was not as simple as it is often remembered. It is true that there was a dispute about how appropriate the term was, but also about how desirable the practice of propaganda was. There were thus four positions: in the first, the term was good but the activity, deceptive and manipulative, was to be deprecated (for example, Lee 1951; Lynd 1939). The second agreed the term was good and while the activity could be bad, it was not irredeemably so. Position two is today associated strongly with the work of many of those writers who undertake studies of 'propaganda'. British historian Philip Taylor (1999:260) is a prominent example. He concluded his historical overview of British propaganda with the *cri de coeur*: 'democracies may delude themselves' into thinking their activities 'not propaganda' but 'information'. However, he noted, 'their propaganda is in the right tradition … Democracies should not be ashamed of selling democracy.' The third position was that the term was bad, as it delegitimised the activity that was, if not noble, at least unavoidable (as for Lasswell, Lazarsfeld and Merton). The fourth position was that the term was bad and the activity it described was not acceptable in a democracy. Sometimes this position was principled, but it could equally be used to suggest that by definition or in practice democracies did not engage in propaganda. This latter is most closely associated with apologists for the public relations industry today (Dinan and Miller 2007).

The debate was a serious matter. In their 1935 annotated bibliography, Harold Lasswell and his colleagues (1969 [1935]) listed more than 3000 published items on propaganda and promotional activities. Timothy Glander (2000:2) describes the debate as raising 'fundamental questions about the very nature of society and the individual, and the proper relationship of the new mass media to both'. Glander

(2000:16) goes on to note that by the late 1930s there were several organisations, 'including the Institute for Propaganda Analysis … that were actively involved in developing anti-propaganda … materials'.

With the approach of the Second World War, 'the institute faced mounting pressure to discontinue its operations'. The Rockefeller Foundation refused to fund it, although they were content then and afterwards to fund Lasswell and Lazarsfeld amongst many other now prominent sociologists (Simpson 1994). Board resignations followed after the Institute became perceived as too critical of government defence policy. Then several board members became 'central figures in the organization and dissemination' of US propaganda during the war (Glander 2000:25). In 1941 it emerged that the House Un-American Activities Committee had been investigating the Institute for two years. The Institute never recovered, and the effective undermining of the anti-propaganda case left the field clear to those who saw propaganda as legitimate and necessary.

Propaganda was understood by its chief chronicler, Harold D Lasswell, as a 'concession' to the 'wilfulness of the age'. 'The bonds of personal loyalty and affection which bound a man to his chief', wrote Lasswell (1927:198–9), 'have long since dissolved. Monarchy and class privilege have gone the way of all flesh, and the idolatry of the individual passes for the official religion of democracy.' In such a situation, the 'new antidote to willfulness is propaganda. If the mass will be free of chains of iron, it must accept its chains of silver. If it will not love, honor and obey, it must not expect to escape seduction' (Lasswell 1927: 199).

Although Lasswell sometimes appeared ambivalent about the term propaganda, he was a firm proponent of its continuation as a practice. According to Glander (2000:xi):

> Those individuals interested in utilizing propaganda in the conduct of the war orchestrated a semantic shift away from the term propaganda … By the onset of World War II, then, mass communications research was the new term to describe what were previously regarded as attempts to develop effective propaganda techniques

So one of the key reasons that sociologists stopped talking about propaganda was that those who were critical of lies and manipulation lost out to those who favoured them. The latter decided not to call these processes propaganda at all, thus making it harder to focus discussion on the question of elite social power and communications. As one of the critics of propaganda, Alfred McClung Lee, put it in 1949:

> If managerial problems for industry and the military are to continue to dominate the research of leading social psychologists and sociologists, the value orientation of the managerial technician rather than the value orientation of the social science educator will dominate what evolves and is called social science. The emphasis can thus shift from service to citizens in a democracy to service for those who temporarily control and who wish to continue to control segments of our society (cited in Glander 2000:38)

McClung Lee had been associated with the Institute for Propaganda Analysis and – so argue his biographers – this was related to the marginalisation he and Elizabeth Briant Lee (to whom he was married – she was also a sociologist) experienced in American sociological circles in the post-war period (Galliher and Galliher 1995).

From that point on Western liberal democracies, in particular the US and UK, invested much more in propaganda than they had before. This was the case not least in the funding of research on propaganda and psychological warfare as demonstrated in Christopher Simpson's path-breaking book *Science of Coercion*. He shows (1994:79) that 'projects secretly funded by the CIA played a prominent role in U.S. mass communication studies during the middle and late 1950s'. CIA funding was often given indirectly – laundered through a wide range of foundations, including the Rockefeller Foundation, which channelled '$1 million in 1956 to gather intelligence on popular attitudes in countries of interest' to communications research pioneer Hadley Cantril (Simpson 1994: 81).

As Glander puts it:

> The construction of propaganda organizations during the war provided an important training ground for mass communications researchers; and through these organizations, mass communications researchers made important personal contacts that facilitated the establishment of the field in the postwar period. (Glander 2000:40)

Simpson (1994:4) states that his research shows that:

> At least six of the most important U.S. centers of postwar communication studies grew up as de facto adjuncts of government psychological warfare programs. For years, government money – frequently with no public acknowledgment – made up more than 75 per cent of the annual budgets of Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR) at Columbia University, Hadley Cantril's Institute for International Social Research (IISR) at Princeton, Ithiel de Sola Pool's Center for International Studies (CENIS) program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and similar institutions.

Lest we imagine that this at worst involved social scientists in message-testing for the state, we should note the direct involvement in coercion and torture which this work involved. In a case exhibiting all-too-familiar parallels with today, the CIA 'clandestinely underwrote the Bureau of Social Science Research's (BSSR) studies of torture – there is no other word for it – of prisoners of war, reasoning that interrogation of captives could be understood as simply another application of the social-psychological principles articulated in communication studies'(Simpson 1994: 4). Clandestine funding was complemented by research access that would possibly test the limits of today's ethics policies. In 1952, for example, RAND Corporation social scientists, including Alexander L George (later of Stanford University), completed 'approximately 1000 interrogations of North Korean and Chinese POW's' (cited in Bowers 1968:244).

The case of the British military and 'Psyops'

So, although the term propaganda fell out of favour amongst sociologists, the practice only got more central in political life. But in sociology, though the practice was often endorsed, much scholarly effort was expended on finding more palatable alternatives. The problem was that replacement terms also began to accumulate the taint of the old. Thus the replacement term 'public relations' has itself accumulated negative connotations (Dinan and Miller 2009). In the military, terms such as psychological warfare were replaced by psychological operations or psyops, before these became suspect too. But finding information on the internal deliberations of the security establishment is not easy. The British state, especially, likes its secrets.

Ian Cobain tells the tale of British official complicity in and perpetration of torture. Indeed, he shows how early British experiments in torture led to significant innovations in the tool box of techniques used by the British military and intelligence services and their ministerial masters today. I use the term 'tool box' advisedly. Cobain reviewed the experiments with 'brainwashing' carried out by the CIA, with direct involvement from both British scientists and intelligence agencies in the 1950s to the 1970s. He is probably correct in concluding that the outcome of all the various experiments was that brainwashing was not a viable approach. As a result more sophisticated kinds of psychological torture were the main focus of research and practice by British officials from the 1970s until today.

Most of this involvement was kept secret. Where small details leaked out, officials dissembled and misled the House of Commons, the press and the public. One of the rare leaks involved the *Daily Mail*, which in 1960 splashed the front page with 'Brainwash shocks' and reported on the activities of the 'Psychological Warfare Unit' based at the Intelligence Corps HQ at Maresfield in Sussex (Cobain 2012:125).

The MoD confirmed to the paper that military personnel undergoing what was called 'resistance to interrogation' training were

> locked in stocks for long periods, forced to sit for long periods on a small one legged stool, and locked in narrow boxes and doused in water. It was not true, the MoD insisted, that they were also stripped naked and forced to stand for long periods while chained to nearby objects. (Cobain 2012:125)

This was a classic 'non-denial denial'. The MoD went on to admit that some personnel were actually stripped naked: 'Men are made to stand and sometimes chained … but usually with underclothes on.' Questions were asked in the House, and the Prime Minister replied that 'the techniques to which these questions refer have never been used by any organisations responsible to Her Majesty's Government'. This was false. The British had been using torture in Cairo and in Cyprus as well as in Kenya and numerous other 'operations of the counter-revolutionary type', as the British Army manual on counterinsurgency called them (Ministry of Defence 1970). It also notes that 53 of these had taken place between 1945 and 1968. How many of us today can recall the names or locations of more than a handful of these operations?

The British developed a method of torture that involved the, subsequently famous, 'five techniques': isolation, sensory deprivation, seemingly self inflicted pain, exhaustion and humiliation. The 'self inflicted' pain included forcing suspects to stand in stress positions for long periods of time. However, as Cobain (2012) rightly points out, invariably accompanying the five techniques was 'a sixth, unspoken, technique': the threat and practice of severe violence for lack of compliance.

Labour MP Noel-Baker, who had personally witnessed, while in the military, the torture in Cairo, was told that the British only trained people how to resist brainwashing and were not taught to inflict such techniques. Then as now, this was a lie (Cobain 2012). British personnel are still taught R2I (Resistance to Interrogation) at the HQ of the successor to the Intelligence Corps. Today, as back in the 1960s, the UK's 'psychological warfare' unit is also based there. Today it is called psychological operations.

In 1960 further enquiries by the *Mail* were headed off by the time-honoured British state technique of having a quiet word: the *Mail*'s editor Bill Hardcastle was approached by a senior MoD official and the story was abandoned (Cobain 2012).

Psyops in Ireland 1971–2

A beam of light can be thrown on the internal workings of the secret state by public inquiries such as the 12-year Bloody Sunday Inquiry. This revealed unprecedented detail regarding the events in Derry in January 1972, including significant new material on the operation of military and government propaganda. The account that follows is drawn from the documents, witness statements and cross-examination undertaken by the inquiry. But it also draws on other evidence from the Public Records Office that was not submitted to the Bloody Sunday Inquiry but throws a new light on some of the testimony there (Figure 9.1).

By the 1960s the term psychological operations (psyops for short) had been adopted by the British military, replacing 'psychological warfare'. But it was not long before it

began to suffer reputational damage. Thus in the terms of reference set for 'psychological operations staff' in July 1971, released to the inquiry, it was noted:

Security

7 The term 'psyops' is always to be avoided. The staff will be referred to as the G (Liaison) Staff and some work is to be overtly connected with Community Relations. (INQ 1873; 1971)

In a later document Colonel Maurice Tugwell (1972), who was in charge of 'Information Policy' at British Army HQ in Northern Ireland from September 1971, had written: 'it is recommended that the term "psyops"' should not be used 'in view of its somewhat sinister connotations'. In general throughout the inquiry the idea that psyops was actually employed was downplayed by the official witnesses, with the exception of the whistleblower Colin Wallace. For example, in his initial statement to the inquiry, an anonymous witness known as INQ 1873 denied any involvement in psyops in Ireland:

I am aware that the term Psychological Operations (Psyops) was sometimes used loosely in a general context but it is an emotive term and misunderstood. There is a principle that psychological operations may not be conducted against one's own people. That principle was adhered to in the Army's operations and activities in Northern Ireland, certainly during the time I was there – I left in June 1972. The IRA was not considered an enemy in the context of a war and the Republican Movement generally was not the subject of any psychological operations because, as I say, it was expressly forbidden – the citizens of Northern Ireland were 'our own people' and that included the IRA.

A more senior operative sent to join the team was Hugh Mooney, a former journalist from the Information Research Department (IRD), the covert anti-communist propaganda agency of the Foreign Office, subsequently closed down by David Owen when he was Foreign Secretary in 1977 (Lashmar and Oliver 1998; Smith 1980; Wilford 1998). He was given a cover title and said to be from the Home Office. He claimed that it was only junior staff that engaged in 'low level' psyops. Thus, under cross-examination he stated that witness INQ 1873 'was conducting PsyOps against and within the population of Northern Ireland, of course'. INQ 1873 then

backtracked, saying: 'Depending on definition, that statement [that psyops was not used] should be amended, after a year of thinking' (INQ 1873; 2002:3).

Questioned as to whether Information Policy, the unit that was set up in late 1971, might in fact have been the realisation of a proposed psyops committee, witness INQ1873 gave the following, somewhat ambiguous, response:

Q. You know that it appears from this document that the term 'PsyOps' was never to be used, or should not be used, because of its similar [damaging] implications. Could it be that the committee that was set up was called the Military Information Policy Committee?

A. It may have devolved from that …

The general line pursued by the official witnesses was that they had not been involved in psyops and that such work was not regarded seriously by London. Mooney, for example, referred to his own role as 'counter-propaganda', a discipline he distinguished sharply from psyops, which he described as 'low level', 'ill conceived' and 'ineffectual' (Mooney KM6.32). Reading the background evidence to the inquiry, however, it transpires that INQ 1873, far from being rather junior and ineffective, was none other than the British Army's leading expert on psyops, responsible for running the pysops training course at the Joint Warfare Establishment at Old Sarum, Wiltshire, before being posted to Ireland (Powerbase 2015a).

Still, Tugwell told the inquiry:

it [psyops] reflects to me the much greater obsession amongst civilian organisations, Foreign Office and the IRD [Information Research Department], very much inclined towards secrecy and psychological this and that. I was just not interested in that … [I]t did not affect my policy, which was to back off from PsyOps.

The disagreement was summarised in the Saville Inquiry Report:

Colin Wallace's evidence was that psyops remained one of the duties of the Information Policy Unit after it replaced the Information Liaison Department. He said that the Unit had three roles, namely to liaise between the Army press room and the Army operations network; to act as a counter-

propaganda organisation dealing in white information; and to act in a deniable role, using black operations ('dirty tricks').

Colonel Tugwell, Colonel INQ 1873 and Hugh Mooney denied that the Information Policy Unit had any involvement in psyops. Their disagreement with Colin Wallace's evidence was based to a significant extent on their definition of psyops. Colin Wallace regarded all three of the above activities as psyops. Colonel Tugwell agreed that the first two were duties of the Information Policy Unit but maintained that of these only the third, dirty tricks, should be classed as psyops. The evidence of Colonel Tugwell, Colonel INQ 1873 and Hugh Mooney was that the Information Policy Unit did not engage in this sort of activity. They said that the Information Policy Unit did not disseminate dishonest or misleading information.

In other words, the official line was that psyops had been ended with the creation of the Information Policy Unit. This was a difficult position to accept given that INQ 1873 had indicated that the plans for a psyops committee may have 'devolved' from the discussion they had. Furthermore, it was not at all clear from the evidence given that they really were denying that dishonest or misleading information was circulated. Their denials, were, in the manner observed above in the 1960 case, non-denial denials.

For example, INQ 1873 discussed psyops in Northern Ireland as involving 'anonymous letters to newspapers … occasionally a change in documents or forging documents; by that I mean copying documents and making them appear to be otherwise than what they are'. When asked whether inaccurate information was ever used, he said: 'Not as a general – not as a general distribution, no.' Then a couple of lines later, asked if the information contained in forged documents was 'generally, to your knowledge, be true?', he said, 'Depending on circumstances, ma'am.' Asked if material disseminated by the Information Policy Unit contained untrue information, the closest he got to a denial was: 'Not as a general rule, no' (INQ 1873; 2002).

Tugwell himself struggled to state clearly that deception and dishonesty were ruled out. Firstly, he drew a distinction between the two terms: 'it is not dishonest to carry … out small deception operations. There is nothing dishonest about that.' In cross-examination he was confronted with his own words from 1972: '"black" activities are unlikely to benefit us except in rare, carefully controlled instances' (Tugwell 1972). He was asked if 'Your requirement was that black activities should

be carefully controlled … by the Military Information Policy Committee; is that a fair inference?' to which Tugwell responded 'I think so, yes' (Tugwell 2002). This seems a clear admission that 'black' ops were not themselves ruled out.

A situation of great political delicacy

Downplaying of the role of psyops reflects the great sensitivity of the use of this kind of manipulative technique especially within the borders of the UK. This is further emphasised by a 1973 Ministry of Defence document on psyops that was not disclosed to the Bloody Sunday Inquiry. 'A situation calling for the use of troops in aid of the civil power in the United Kingdom would', it said, 'clearly be one of great political delicacy.'

The document confirms the evidence at the Bloody Sunday Inquiry that the term psyops was considered sensitive. It referred to a psyops teams in Hong Kong and one in Oman (since September 1971) which 'are referred to publicly as Army Information Teams (AIT) for reasons of local expediency' (Stanbridge 1973:A-4).

Contrary to the impression given by official witnesses at the Saville Inquiry, that psyops was a marginal activity which had been phased out, the document says explicitly that 'Strategic psyops' are 'a continuing activity with a high political content'. Formulation of policy and overall strategy in this area was said to involve 'several departments' through a committee (The Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee (Ancillary Measures)) on which the MoD was represented along with Foreign Office departments including, unsurprisingly, the Information Research Department, Mooney's employer. Strategic psyops 'are not wholly or even mainly a military function and are not necessarily linked with actual military operations', though 'military forces may be involved in implementing' (A-2) them. As the document notes, 'Policy is laid down through the Northern Ireland Department', not being, therefore, a matter for relatively junior Army officers.

The document goes on to note that since the Second World War British forces have employed psyops on a number of occasions. In Malaya, they 'were used to isolate the terrorists from the civil population, create apathy, discord and defeatism within the terrorists' organisation, and eventually to conduct an effective surrender

campaign'. In Borneo, psyops were 'used successfully'. In Oman, psyops 'have played a valuable part in encouraging the surrender of over 500 rebels, most of whom are now fighting as members of the Government Firquats' (Stanbridge 1973). The Firquats were a paramilitary force trained by the Special Air Service (SAS).

Government policy 'required at the time that "the Services … annotate certain posts to be psyops trained (five day course) by JWE [Joint Warfare Establishment]"" In addition other posts were 'annotated' to be 'psyops briefed' (A-4). These posts were listed over six pages in an appendix to the document.

In short, the document gives a markedly different account of the role of psyops to that given by Tugwell and Mooney at the Bloody Sunday Inquiry. It says specifically that psyops is defined as 'planned psychological activities in peace and war directed towards enemy, friendly and neutral audiences to create attitudes and behaviours favourable to the achievement of political and military objectives' (Stanbridge 1973:A-1). This undermines the claim that only dirty tricks or 'black' operations are to be described as psyops. The document also describes UK psyops units in Hong Kong and one in Northern Ireland, which was said to include 'one Colonel and one Lieutenant Colonel at HQNI and one Major at HQ 8 Infantry Brigade all of whom are employed in information policy matters'. This was the unit headed by Tugwell. All the staff were, therefore, employed in psyops posts, a point at variance with his claim that psyops had been stopped. Mooney, of the IRD, had tried to maintain that his job of counter-propaganda was something separate from psyops, but the document unambiguously refers to 'counter propaganda and other aspects of psyops'.

The document also refers to psyops as 'improving relationships with allies, undermining the enemy's will to fight, promoting suspicion and distrust and exploiting disagreements among the enemy' to 'lower morale, promote defeatism, discord, and perhaps panic, and to encourage desertion, defection and surrender' (A-2). 'Deception' is thus referred to as a 'specialised form of psyops' (A-3) and is distinguished from 'public relations', which is 'concerned solely with the dissemination of factual information' (A-2). Much of the document, therefore, undermines the official testimony at the Bloody Sunday Inquiry.

Psyops today

Today psyops continues to be practised by the UK state, including by a secretive military unit called the 15 (UK) Psychological Operations Group, which is the successor to the psyops units deployed in Ireland and other arenas of counter-insurgency warfare.

As in the past the issue of what to call the activity is contentious. Those given the job of managing the communications of the military try to give an impression of openness and transparency. However, the same agencies are sometimes very sensitive to criticism, which can subvert their professed policies of openness.

The Ministry of Defence appointed a 'lead' for 'strategic communication', which was their preferred new term to replace propaganda and psyops (Powerbase 2015b). The Ministry's man in 2010 was Steve Tatham, a Naval officer who says he is the UK's 'longest continuously serving Officer in Information Activities'. He writes that 'Strategic Communication is widely misunderstood. At best it is seen by the military as a developing term for media and information operations. At worst it is seen as spin and propaganda' (Tatham 2008:24). The term 'spin', he notes,

> has gained increasing popularity, often used with reference to the distortion, perhaps even manipulation (perceived or otherwise) of information … In the UK military environment we are confident with terms such as Information and Media Operations, whilst in military staff colleges Influence and Persuasion are debated. Civilian academics may speak of Soft Power and Public Diplomacy and cynics might prefer the use of Propaganda. There is a real danger that Strategic Communication is associated negatively with emotive and often inaccurate terms. (Tatham 2008:9)

Tatham (2010:1) has claimed that 'I am absolutely required by military doctrine to provide only "factual" information to the media – a requirement I have championed and reinforced through various published academic papers in which I have promoted honesty, accuracy and openness in the military's dealings with the world's media'.

In 2010 Tatham took up the post of commanding officer of the 15 UK Psyops Group, though this was not announced publicly. The BBC reported in 2012 that

Tatham 'remains keen to stress that British military psychological operations are not propaganda' (Wyatt 2012):

> 'I absolutely hate that word,' he sighs. 'The term propaganda is applied to untruthful past dictatorial regimes, which used media for their own devious ends. That's not the genesis of psyops. I know a lot of people on the web link propaganda and psyops together, but everything we do is perfectly truthful and perfectly attributable. That's cast in gold. A lie will always catch you out.'

As the BBC reported, 'they say that what they produce must be both attributable and truthful, in stark contrast to the traditional reputation of psyops in the US and on the internet, where conspiracy theories abound' (Wyatt 2012).

The trouble with such reassuring sentiments is that they appear to bear only an ambiguous relation to the truth. Let's take each in turn: the link between psyops and propaganda; 'attribution' and lying; and secrecy and openness.

Propaganda and psyops

Psyops is linked umbilically to propaganda. The accepted account of the genesis of the term is that it entered the English language from the German Nazi phrase *Weltanschauungskrieg* ('world view warfare') (Simpson 1994:11). The British version of the phrase was 'political warfare', as reflected in the name of the Second World War organisation responsible: the Political Warfare Executive. Both the British and German concepts for what later became known as psychological warfare 'links mass communication with selective application of violence (murder, sabotage, assassination, insurrection, counterinsurrection and so on) as a means of achieving ideological, political, or military goals' (Simpson 1994:11).

US military and intelligence organisations 'stretched the definition during World War II to cover a broader range of applications of psychology and social psychology to wartime problems, including battlefront propaganda, ideological training of friendly forces, and ensuring morale and discipline on the home front' (Simpson 1994:11).

Propaganda by Western democratic regimes is very much the origins of psychological warfare. Psychological operations is simply a term used in peacetime as a more palatable alternative to 'warfare'.

Attribution and truth

Claims of truthfulness and attribution can be examined in a number of ways. One is to examine the revised doctrine on 'Information operations' published by the Ministry of Defence published in 2009. It does not seem to substantiate the claim of honesty and accuracy.

> Information operations will on occasion require an aggressive and manipulative approach to delivering messages (usually through the PSYOPS tool). This is essential in order to attack, undermine and defeat the will, understanding and capability of insurgents (Ministry of Defence 2009:6–5)

Perhaps one can aggressively and manipulatively deliver honest and open messages? The question of attribution goes to the heart of whether psyops engages in 'black' operations. These are operations often thought of as 'dirty tricks', but can be more narrowly defined as activities where the source of the message is disguised or faked, perhaps through forged documents or through radio or TV broadcasts which claim to be from one's opponent. We saw examples above of discussion of this in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s. Colonel Bob Stewart, who commanded the British peacekeeping forces in Bosnia, reportedly 'made use of psyops techniques when he served as an intelligence officer in Northern Ireland during the Troubles' (Kelly 2008). He distinguishes between white and black propaganda: 'White is when you tell things as they are, while black is putting more devious stuff about.' 'The value of psyops can be immense,' he says, 'but whatever you say must be believable, and preferably the truth.' Note: 'preferably' the truth.

Secrecy and openness

Psyops and other official propaganda activities are also chronically secretive and lacking in openness. For example, in 2010 the MoD refused to name the new head of UK psyops even after a Freedom of Information (FoI) request. It was only via other

sources that this was confirmed to be Steve Tatham. During the same period Tatham's hitherto open approach as a military spin doctor was reversed. His website had all content removed from it (see Powerbase 2015b). Subsequently, in 2012, Commander Tatham featured in an MoD press release as recipient of an award as commanding officer of 15 Psyops Group. This was the first time it had been acknowledged in public that he had that role. A further FoI request invited the MoD to confirm that he was indeed the commanding officer and the dates of his appointment. The MoD rejected the request on the grounds that it was 'vexatious', but relented on review. The subsequent disclosure included internal MoD correspondence debating whether to release the information in relation to the first (2010) request. In an email to Tatham, released under the FOI Act, an MoD official wrote:

> We are still battling with the FOI request. The latest question is can you confirm that your name as CO of 15 POG is not already in the public domain (2 November 2010; 18:44 hrs cited in Tranham 2013)

One of Tatham's subordinates replied in an email dated 3 November 2010 (09.11 hrs): 'just got hold of the boss, re below – absolutely not. He has been meticulous in ensuring that, in the public domain, his name has not been associated with 15POG.'

The Orwellian-sounding 'sword of peace' award was given to Tatham's unit for work to 'inform, reassure, educate and through the promotion of free and unbiased discussion persuade Afghans that their futures are best served not with the Taliban, nor with ISAF, but with themselves and their elected government' (MoD 2012).

The possibility that an occupying power might be able to promote 'free and unbiased' discussion seems, perhaps, a little unlikely in itself. We can note that in the UK (as elsewhere) psyops is part of military intelligence. The 15POG is a component of 1 Military Intelligence Brigade, based at Chicksands in Wiltshire. The base is a key hub for military and defence intelligence. Figure 9.2 (obtained under the Freedom of Information Act) shows the units housed at Chicksands in 2008. These include the Defence Intelligence and Security Centre, which itself houses the Defence School of Intelligence and several intelligence training units including the Human Intelligence Training wing. Also based there is 'SERE Trg', which is part of the Defence SERE Training Organisation. SERE is Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Extraction, and is

where military and intelligence personnel are trained to 'resist' interrogation. Then known as the Joint Services Intelligence Organisation, the 'resistance to interrogation training' unit moved to Chicksands in the mid-1990s. There, as Ian Cobain (2012:283) shows in his coruscating book on British involvement in torture, the JSIO 'not only practised interrogation techniques that were cruel and illegal, but also taught others to do likewise'. The Heath government publicly banned torture in 1972 after the outcry about the use of the 'five techniques' used against internees in Northern Ireland. But privately they continued to condone the techniques. 'The use of hoods', notes Cobain (2012:283–4),

> had never been abandoned by the Intelligence Corps. Trainees were also told that prisoners should be kept awake before interrogation, that prisoners should be stripped naked and kept naked until they obeyed orders, and that trainees were permitted to use a technique known as "harshing": threatening and screaming abuse at high volume as a distance of around six inches from the prisoners' faces.

Cobain notes that the 'R2I' (Resistance to Interrogation) and 'CAC' (Conduct After Capture) training was 'very similar' to the training that 'Guantanamo interrogators had studied at Fort Bragg in North Carolina'; so similar in fact that in the US it was called Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape while latterly in the UK it was renamed Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Extraction. Other similarities include the fact that as well as training in torture, Fort Bragg is the main base for psyops in the US, and houses the 4th Military Information Support Group (formerly the 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne)) and the 8th Military Information Support Group (Airborne). The Americans are a little more open than the British, having a psyops Facebook presence (see: https://www.facebook.com/8MISG).

In accepting the award on behalf of the 15POG, Steve Tatham (2012) said it was 'a real joy' to accept the award 'on behalf of the Unit which has until now not only been under-recognised for its work in Afghanistan but quite often deliberately misrepresented by conspiracy theorists, pseudo-academics and Hollywood producers'.

'It's easy', he went on, 'for armchair commentators who have never had to place themselves in harm's way to write utter guff … but it does a terrible dis-service

to the men and women of the UK's Armed Forces who give so very much.' The 'utter guff' to which Tatham refers is the material on Powerbase, a website edited by the present author (see Powerbase 2015c). Suggesting that critics are 'deliberately misrepresenting' UK psyops is a hard charge to prove. In reality, the conduct and impact of psyops can only be properly analysed in relation to empirical evidence, as opposed to claiming knowledge of the intentions of critics. It is, of course, difficult for officials who are paid to engage in psychological operations, which can, according to the MoD, involve an 'aggressive and manipulative' approach, to step outside that position so as to credibly claim that any particular statement they make is *actually* true.

Psyops and coercion

It is not as if as Tatham, the MoD's 'intellectual lead' on strategic communications during this period, is somehow adrift of official doctrine. In 2008 he acknowledged that the official view does not see strategic communication as simply a matter of communication in itself. Any definition of the concept of strategic communications must 'recognise' he wrote, 'that the success of non-kinetic effect is amplified by threats of kinetic activity … Influence does not mean the exclusion of hard power' (Tatham 2008:15). To be clear: the term 'kinetic' in military doctrine refers to killing (Noah 2002). Major Harry Taylor, head of 42 Commando Royal Marines' psyops, described the approach taken in 2003:

> We use tactical and strategic methods. Tactically, on the first stage, we target the military by dropping leaflets stating the inevitability of their defeat, telling them they will not be destroyed if they play our game and exactly how they can surrender. On the second wave we show them pictures of Iraqi officers who complied. On the third wave we show them pictures of those people who did not.

Translation: co-operate or we will kill you. This approach can be seen in many of the psyops leaflets produced during the Iraq War, which emphasise that, for example, 'Coalition Air Power can strike at will. Any time, Any place' (US Central Command 2002) (Figure 9.3 and 9.4).

Another indication of how 'kinetic effects' or 'hard power' interact with psyops can be seen in the Abu Ghraib torture photos scandal. Some thought that the images of the degradation of Iraqi prisoners showed torture and were 'trophy photos' (Zimbardo 2005). They may have been. But there is evidence not only that the 'enhanced interrogation techniques' were authorised by the Bush administration up to and including the Vice-President and President (BBC News 2014), but also that the images were part of the torture as opposed to merely a record of it.

Seymour Hersh (2004) revealed that this operation ran by the name of Copper Green. According to one of his sources,

> the purpose of the photographs was to create an army of informants, people you could insert back in the population … It was thought that some prisoners would do anything – including spying on their associates – to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends.

According to Lynndie England, the poster girl for the Abu Ghraib scandal:

> I was instructed by persons in higher rank to 'stand there, hold this leash and look at the camera.' The pictures were for Psyops reasons … They'd come back and they'd look at the pictures and they'd state, 'Oh, that's a good tactic … This is working. Keep doing it, it's getting what we need'. (cited in Ronson 2005:166–7)

The Abu Ghraib photos are not, therefore, just a record of torture, but an active part in the process of torture – an illustration of the coercive nature of this kind of psyops and of its continuing and close relationship with intelligence and torture.

Sociology and propaganda

Some conclusions: it is important to go back to examine the work of early sociologists as they have much to teach, not least on the importance of propaganda. Of course it might be that we don't learn the same lessons as they did, but at least we will understand more about how we got where we are now.

Propaganda is not simply a matter of the symbolic, but of concrete action (involving the symbolic) backed up by variably credible threats of force (or economic

or other incentives) and sometimes involving actual 'kinetic effects', known more widely as violence and killing. In other words, propaganda is neither simply a matter of ideas and communication (the 'symbolic' or 'discursive'). Rather it is a concrete practice involving both ideas and their expression in communication. But communication, being itself part of the material world, combines with the rest of the material (including economic and coercive power) to form social reality. No propaganda strategy takes place outside that. Furthermore, building on this, we can say that propaganda is situated not simply on the consent side of the consent/coercion distinction.

In the examples given above, we can see how the coercive power of the military is integrated into psyops strategies. It is better, I contend, to see propaganda as 'propagating' particular views and interests as a matter of organised persuasive communication (Bakir et al. submitted).

The question of what we call propaganda is not going away. While the attempt to replace the term with less honest terms such as public relations has had some notable success, particularly in terms of scholarly production, propaganda has not been excised from common usage. The difficulty is that successive replacements for propaganda end up being tainted by association with manipulation and deception. This will continue to happen, as we saw in the example of psychological warfare and its replacement with psyops.

The attempts by state operatives to airbrush their communication strategies, by calling them something sweeter smelling, absorbs significant human and ideological resources. Question their work and you may find that government officials write to your employer to complain, suggest that material about them is 'removed' from the web, denounce 'conspiracy theorists' and 'pseudo-academics' who write 'utter guff' which 'deliberately misrepresent[s]' psyops.

Propaganda and psychological operations have historically been secret and are still not fully and openly acknowledged by the British state or its operatives and disciples. Secrecy is one reason why we have not properly appreciated how propaganda works. But, as we have seen, the willing subordination of sociologists to the interests and values of great power is another.

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