

# Propaganda, Algorithmic Governmentality and An Ontological Transformation

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that propaganda has not disappeared in the digital age but has evolved into a more subtle and effective form through algorithmic governmentality. While classical propaganda mechanisms relied on discourse and persuasion, contemporary systems act through data-driven modulation. Algorithms organise perception, shape behaviour, and serve power without explicit messaging. Drawing on Rouvroy's theory and classical models, the paper shows how influence now operates through infrastructure rather than argument. The paper focuses on the shift in the mechanisms that enable propaganda and public persuasion. Algorithmic governmentality, which is the contemporary extension of Foucauldian governmentality as theorised by Rouvroy and Berns, allows propaganda to function more efficiently and invisibly. Case studies of the U.S. Committee on Public Information and modern botnet operations from Russia and Israel illustrate this ontological shift. What emerges is a more subtle and pervasive force of computational governance.

**Keywords:** Propaganda, Algorithmic Governmentality, Modulation, Digital Infrastructure, Dividual, Political Influence

## Introduction

Early theories about propaganda described it as a systematic means through which the ruling classes tried to control over the public's perception of reality, their feeling and actions. Walter Lippmann was one of the first to present this view when he described the average person is mediated by pictures inside heads to make sense of the world. As per Lippmann, the real world was out of reach, out of sight, out of mind (Lippmann). Propaganda helps to arrange the mental map by letting the public see only certain parts of the world and hiding others. Similarly, Edward Bernays spoke of an invisible government of propagandists who manipulates the organized habits and opinions of the masses and that the modern world is ruled by them (Bernays). These people not only influence but also shape public opinion, directing the flow of trends they want. According to Jacques Ellul, the propagandist's work is much more than simply to convince. He intensifies the already existing trends, reroutes and refines them and mostly, guides people to action (Ellul). To put it differently, propaganda does not just redirect people's thoughts in the abstract, but it stimulates and even frightens them

into taking or not taking actions that are compatible with the interests of the powerful. Herman and Chomsky illustrated the grassroots level link between propaganda and power in their propaganda model. According to them, in countries where wealth is concentrated and there is political disputation, the media's role is to instil the society with the values that make them a part of the power structure. (Herman and Chomsky). Through the representations that these classical scholars (Lippmann, Bernays, Ellul, Herman & Chomsky), the core intentions of propaganda can be understood as organising perception, modulating behaviour and serving political/ideological power. Together, these classical theories see propaganda as a conscious, message-based enterprise of persuasion and myth-making, conducted through the dominant media of each era (print, radio, film, television) to manufacture consent for established power.

### **Evolution of Propaganda in Classical governance to Algorithmic governance**

Throughout history, propaganda has intermingled with the communication infrastructures. Propaganda, therefore, turned out to be audiovisual and of large scale during the early part of the 20th century when radio and cinema gained prominence. Using radio, the German state was able to create a milieu and the propaganda eventually reached millions of homes and reinforced existing anti-Semitic attitudes (Meier). During the Cold War and the age of television, the radical and potent visual element and TV news became fresher media. Carefully edited and packaged, the television images of conflict or victory led to a similar effect of shaping the reality of the viewers. Thereafter came the internet and, particularly, social media with a radical change. The very infrastructure of communication was interactive and data-driven. Thus, propagandists went to operate in the digital realm. One such instance was during the 2010s, when Facebook pages and posts were heavily used to convey fast ethnic propaganda against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar. (Schissler)

Overall, propaganda's mode changed with technology, but its purpose remained. Contemporary researchers note that social media algorithms now act as a pipeline, automatically recommending ever more extreme content once a user shows interest (Munn). Each era thus saw propaganda remix its core functions to fit new media. These shifts set the stage for algorithmic governmentality, a new form of power in which propaganda operates. It no longer depends on linear messages but on continuous, data-driven modulation through the digital infrastructure.

### **Algorithmic Governmentality**

To theorise contemporary power, scholars such as Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns use the Foucauldian notion of governmentality but updated for the digital age. In their definition, algorithmic governmentality is a method founded on the automated collection, aggregation and analysis of big data in order to anticipate and pre-emptively affect possible behaviours (Rouvroy and Berns). That is, modern governance increasingly operates through automated data pipelines and predictive models rather than through laws or overt persuasion. Several characteristic features distinguish this mechanism:

- **Infra-individual fragments:** Algorithmic power does not see citizens as single moral entities but rather as a bundle of measurable traits. Digital platforms constantly collect infra-individual digital traces from clicks to biometrics which result in each person being a supra-individual made up of a large number of data points. Rouvroy describes it this way: individuals become "code that is subject to control and modulation."
- **Raw Data:** As Rouvroy notes, behaviour is guided by real-time data feedback rather than. For example, an algorithm might suppress election-related posts from one group and amplify another's content entirely behind the scenes, with no explicit speech act or narrative. In effect, the digital infrastructure becomes the medium of propaganda. People are surveilled and swayed through code rather than convinced through classical methods. There is no need for a propagandist's speech when the platform's architecture itself selects and prioritises messages.
- **Correlation based profiling:** Algorithmic propaganda not only keeps on growing in correlation but also differs from classical propaganda, which frequently refers to widely understood ideological causes. Through the use of data, systems create statistical profiles for the purpose of discovering patterns. Then they guess what might be the motivation or the cause of a person's anger. One analysis explains that algorithmic governance consists of three steps: data collection, data mining for correlations and finally, using those correlations to predict and guide individual behaviour. In this way, a shift occurs from average estimates of the general population to the intricate multi-dimensional "data doubles" of each person. Therefore, influence campaigns do not have to tell stories; they just take advantage of what the data correlations imply as the most effective. Changes in the visibility of ads or memes can be manipulated and implemented at great speed, all without appealing to conscious reasoning.

Taken together, these features imply a qualitative change in how power is exercised. Classical power addressed subjects through discourse. Algorithmic power addresses individuals through data. The individual subject becomes a bundle of "dividual" data profiles, whose wishes, desires and actions are pre-figured by algorithms. In short, the ontological ground where propaganda functions changes. It is now embedded in the rules and rhythms of code, not in the chain of signifiers.

### **Algorithmic Systems Fulfilling Classical Propaganda Functions**

Despite this transformation, algorithmic systems can still accomplish propaganda's classical objectives often more efficiently and at greater scale than ever. But they do so non-discursively. The following case comparisons illustrate how algorithmic propaganda replicates and the functions of its classical counterpart:

- **U.S. Committee on Public Information (CPI)** (Example for propaganda in classical governance): The Creel Committee during World War I is a classic example of propaganda. In the words of James R. Mock and Cedric Larson, it was, in fact, the American propaganda ministry for the entire war period.

The CPI under George Creel exercised all the power in the control of public perception of the war by controlling press releases, multiplying the distribution of posters and pamphlets and even organising patriotic events. Its role was to help control all military news coming and going and to promote the war effort at home. So, in other words, it was simply filling up the media with the Allied side of the story and America's heroic deeds while condemning the enemy. The CPI wanted to shape the entire nation's perception by covering every medium (print, film, speech) with the same unified message. The Committee also tried to change citizens' behaviour by urging them to buy Liberty Bonds, ration food, enlist and avoid dissenters. All of this was aimed at serving U.S. political power in other words, the CPI was able to win the support of the public through the powerful and well-timed speeches alone. (Mock and Larson)

- **Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) on Twitter** (Example of propaganda methods in algorithmic governmentality): Russian agencies were active in social media at the time of the U.S. election, using the Internet Research Agency (IRA) to create a multitude of fake accounts on Twitter, which were all aimed at distributing controversial messages. A study conducted by COMPROP reported that during this particular election, the activity of Twitter bots was at an unprecedented level: the number of very automated pro Trump bots surpassed that of their pro-Clinton counterparts almost five times by the end of the election. A lot of the social media exchanges besides the rally hashtags were artificially amplified by these bots (in one story, analysts say that during debates one-third of all the pro-Trump tweets were made by bots). The IRA wanted to capture people's perceptions by pouring out the messages that divided people and at the same time to influence voters by making them distrustful and separating them into groups. This was a win-win for Russia wanting to destabilize the U.S. politically and undermine its global power. The most important point is that these operations on Twitter were conducted with total reliance on algorithms: the manipulation of accounts and hashtags was being done at lightning speed through the platform's API. Compared to CPI's distribution of posters or pamphlets, there was no need for a central message at all; rather, the bots' activities of re-tweeting and content repeating were done in such a way that algorithms further promoted them. The outcome was a digital echo chamber that was ubiquitous and it subtly guided public discourse without any single text or speech being the focus of attention. To summarize, algorithmic propaganda has here taken over the functions of the CPI without being noticed (Woolley and Howard)

Each of these algorithmic cases mirrors the functions of CPI-style propaganda. They filter information, reinforce chosen narratives and guide public attitudes. But they do so non-discursively. Modern propaganda is thus embedded in the platform architecture itself. The empirical evidence proves that such campaigns conducted by algorithms can reach millions much faster than any agency of the 20th century ever could. The

ontology has changed; the machinery of power has become the system of code infrastructure, and propaganda is executed by it.

### **Conclusion: An Ontological Shift**

The rise of algorithmic governmentality marks not just a change in propaganda techniques but a deeper transformation in how influence operates. While classical propaganda relied on clear messages aimed at individuals who could be persuaded, algorithmic propaganda works through constant, data-driven adjustments to digital environments. It does not speak but nudges. Instead of arguing, it predicts. While the U.S. Committee on Public Information would distribute posters and give speeches in its propaganda efforts, today's influence takes place through bots and algorithms which control how users interact and when users will interact. The concept of propaganda as persuasive media, introduced by Ellul, has been overtaken by the system of managing the experience through automated filtering. The questions posed by Herman and Chomsky with respect to media content have to be rethought in terms of the platforms themselves which filter according to arbitrary rules. This means that there are no constant subjects to be persuaded. Instead, users become profiles and behavioural patterns, "infra-individuals" as Rouvroy calls them. The prediction of the actions and modification of the environment takes place before the user knows what is going on. This is an ontological shift because it is a shift in the very meaning of governing and persuasion in public life. While public opinion used to be something created by people's conscious beliefs, nowadays it is generated by an algorithm that manipulates which messages get amplified and which ones get stifled. The distinction between the truth and manipulation becomes difficult when the data speak for themselves and one does not know how it is being manipulated. In conclusion, propaganda still tries to direct the course of action of individuals as well as to legitimize itself and support the power. What has changed is the manner in which propaganda functions. It no longer tries to speak to the individual but works behind the scenes all the time. It does not try to prove its point in public discussion but creates the settings for such discussions to take place. The only way to react to the challenge posed by this new form of propaganda is to treat it as infrastructure.

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