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Models of Public Opinion Formation Through Propaganda

Abstract

Formation of public opinion is one of the cornerstones of political, media and cultural influence. In the era of information society, where the speed of data dissemination has increased dramatically, and the mechanisms of influence have become more sophisticated, the relevance of studying propaganda models increases. The purpose of this article is to consider the key theoretical models that explain how propaganda influences the consciousness of the masses, and to identify the features of their functioning in various historical and media contexts. Analysis of the problems of propaganda as an important type of information weapon, forms of influence used in modern information wars, is of great relevance in the field of international relations.

Keywords: Propaganda, Information War, Media, Media and Cultural Influence

Propaganda Yoluyla Kamuoyu Oluşturma Modelleri

Öz

Kamuoyu oluşumu, siyasi, medya ve kültürel etkinin temel taşlarından biridir. Veri yayma hızının çarpıcı bir şekilde arttığı ve etki mekanizmalarının daha sofistike hale geldiği bilgi toplumu çağında, propaganda modellerini incelemenin önemi artmaktadır. Bu makalenin amacı, propagandanın kitlelerin bilincini nasıl etkilediğini açıklayan temel teorik modelleri ele almak ve bunların çeşitli tarihsel ve medya bağlamlarında işleyiş özelliklerini belirlemektir. Önemli bir bilgi silahı türü olarak



<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/atdd>

propagandanın sorunlarının analizi, modern bilgi savaşlarında kullanılan etki biçimleri, uluslararası ilişkiler alanında büyük önem taşımaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Propaganda, Enformasyon Savaşı, Medya, Medya ve Kültürel Etki*

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century, along with the rapid development of mass media, propaganda as a tool for the artificial formation of public opinion and its manipulation has been used more widely than ever before. Methods of influencing people's worldviews and directing public attention in the right direction have proven to be extremely popular for commercial and political purposes. In different parts of the world, propaganda has become the best support and the most powerful tool for both regime change and for maintaining them. The history of the 20th century, which left humanity with the memory of two World Wars, revolutions, and a host of local military conflicts, clearly demonstrates how manipulation of public consciousness with the help of the media allows entire nations to be controlled.

The problems of propaganda are almost always at the forefront of all discussions that have been and are being conducted now, when it comes to the essence and specificity of information and communication processes in society. There is no doubt that propaganda is indeed a very specific form, a means of influencing the peculiarity, public opinion in societies of different types. Moreover, it is well known that some politicians and scientists at a certain time were inclined to attribute the functioning of propaganda exclusively to situations when it came to authoritarian and totalitarian political regimes, considering it as one of the exclusively manipulative forms of totalitarian control over the masses.

And today, in the conditions of information confrontation caused by the complex political and economic situation in the world, the hidden influence of propaganda on people has only increased. In such a situation, it is important to be able to identify attempts of external influence on public opinion, and not only to avoid this influence, but also to analyze its sources, goals and consequences. There are several definitions of the concept of propaganda. Let's consider some of them, and also try to analyze various methods and techniques of propaganda.

A number of researchers believe that information warfare is aimed primarily at the human mind. Propaganda is a systematic and purposeful activity aimed at forming certain attitudes, opinions and behavior patterns. He viewed propaganda as a tool by which elites influence mass consciousness, especially in times of war and political conflict. He laid the foundations for the behaviorist approach to communication research. According to the definition of Harold Lasswell, one of the founders of modern political communication: *"propaganda is the management of collective opinion by the manipulation of significant*

symbols” (Lasswell, 1926, p. 9) It is worth noting that Harold Lasswell’s *Propaganda Technique in the World War* was published in 1926, several years after the end of World War I, a conflict in which propaganda was used on an industrial scale for the first time in history. At that time, Western sociology and political psychology were just beginning to understand the role of mass communications in governing society. Lasswell was one of the first to undertake a systematic analysis of media messages, methods of agitation, and influence on mass consciousness in wartime. Harold Lasswell’s approach to the study of propaganda is fundamental in understanding how elites influence mass consciousness through symbols and emotions. His theory shows that propaganda is not just the dissemination of information, but a powerful tool for managing thinking and behavior, especially in times of crisis. Despite its simplifications, his model remains relevant as a basis for analyzing modern media campaigns and digital propaganda.

The classical understanding of propaganda includes both informational and emotional impact. Jacques Ellul, a French sociologist and author of the fundamental work *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, emphasizes that propaganda is not just the dissemination of ideas, but a technology for introducing these ideas into consciousness, bypassing critical thinking.

Ellul emphasizes that propaganda is a systematic and long-term process aimed not only at persuasion, but also at changing behavior. He distinguishes between “political” and “sociological” propaganda. “Propaganda is the totality of methods used by an organized group to force society to act in a certain direction” (Ellul, 2021). Unlike Lasswell, who presented the audience as a relatively passive mass, Ellul notes that propaganda acts on an already prepared person - someone who is educated, consumes media, lives in a society with a high information density. Modern man needs propaganda, because it simplifies and rationalizes a complex reality. This idea is especially relevant in the information age: an excess of data creates a dependence on interpretations, and therefore makes the individual susceptible to propaganda. Jacques Ellul proposed an approach to propaganda that is fundamentally different from classical models: he treats it not as a one-time action of influence, but as a structural element of technogenic civilization, forming a type of person ready to obey and act in the right direction. His theory continues to influence research in the field of critical media theory, philosophy of technology and political psychology.

Also of note is Chomsky and Herman's "propaganda model" which is a critical analysis of the influence of mainstream media on public opinion based on the idea that the media are not objective but rather promote the interests of those who own them. The model argues that media outlets are typically part of large corporations or conglomerates, and therefore their information policies cannot be free from the influence of their owners. Chomsky and Herman argued that even in a liberal democracy with formal freedom of speech and an independent press, propaganda exists-but in a hidden, institutionalized form.

“Propaganda in a liberal democracy is carried out through the systematic structuring of information to suit the interests of the elites” (Herman & Chomsky, 2008). This definition shows that propaganda is not a direct imposition of opinions, as in totalitarian regimes. It is carried out through filtering, emphases, repetitions, hushing up, and structuring the agenda. The role of the media is not to criticize the government, but to ensure the “consent” necessary for the functioning of elite interests in a democratic society. Chomsky and Herman’s propaganda model offers a radical reconsideration of the role of media in liberal democracy. It shows that press freedom is not only a formal institution, but also a space of hidden power structures through which the ideological control of the masses is carried out. This model remains relevant in the 21st century, especially in the context of algorithmic control and corporate centralization of digital platforms.

One of the most prominent philosophers of the French Enlightenment, Helvetius viewed man as a product of his environment and upbringing, and social institutions as instruments for controlling the opinions and behavior of the masses. His philosophy underlies the early critical understanding of propaganda as a means of ideological domination by the ruling class. His treatises *On Man* (Helvétius, 1769) and became the subject of much debate and were even condemned by religious authorities. “Propaganda is the art of manipulating opinion by instilling ideas that are advantageous to the ruling class” (Helvétius, 1769) This definition allows us to draw several key conclusions:

- Propaganda is not a random or morally neutral process, but a purposeful and strategic suggestion.

- The primary function of propaganda is to serve the interests of power, to ensure loyalty and control over society.
- The central place is occupied by influencing opinion, and not only actions: behavior control is mediated by manipulation of perception.

Helvetius emphasizes: power shapes morality and consciousness through education, religion, art, legislation - that is, the entire symbolic order. Propaganda is nothing other than an

institutionalized form of this education, where "truth" is determined by what serves the interests of the ruling class. Claude Helvetius's concept of propaganda is a philosophical and materialistic justification for the ideological influence of elites on mass consciousness. He was the first to clearly indicate that control over opinion is not a side effect of politics, but its central mechanism. In doing so, Helvetius opened the way for subsequent theories of propaganda as an instrument of domination and legitimization of power - from Marx and Gramsci to Chomsky and Bourdieu.

A philosophical and political analysis of the concept of propaganda is given by Hannah Arendt, one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century. She notes that “propaganda in totalitarian regimes does not simply lie – it creates an alternative reality in which people believe” (Arendt, 1951). This definition emphasizes the ontological power of propaganda – it does not simply inform, disinform or manipulate, but constructs an entire pseudo-real world within which a person thinks and acts. In this sense, propaganda is not a “tool,” but a structural element of totalitarian thinking and power.

Hannah Arendt's concept of propaganda is a philosophical critique of the manipulation of truth and consciousness inherent in totalitarian regimes. Propaganda here is not just a means of influence, but a form of existence of power, depriving the individual of freedom of thought and creating an artificial reality in which the differences between fiction and reality disappear. Arendt thus anticipates the debates about post-truth, information warfare and manipulative democracy of the 21st century.

Scholars have identified several key features of propaganda:

- One-sidedness: Focusing only on favorable facts, ignoring alternative points of view.
- Appeal to emotion: Using fear, patriotism, hatred, and other emotions to enhance impact.
- Repetition: Frequent repetition of messages helps reinforce desired attitudes.
- Authority of the source: Propaganda often relies on “official” or “trusted” channels to increase credibility.

Thus, propaganda is not only a tool of authoritarian regimes, but also a mechanism operating within democratic societies through the media, education, culture and social networks.

Propaganda is a conscious form of communication aimed at influencing people's thoughts and behaviors. Unlike other forms of propaganda, white propaganda seeks to use

accurate and reliable information. In this type of propaganda, the aim is for accurate information to create the desired effect (Avci, 2018). White propaganda always sources its information from specific, reliable, and official sources, which enhances its credibility. This type of propaganda aims to use real and accurate information, preventing the dissemination of false or misleading information to the public. White propaganda seeks to debunk the enemy's claims by informing the public with accurate and reliable information, thereby exposing the falsehood or deception of the opposing side.

White propaganda aims to guide the thoughts and behaviors of the target audience with accurate information, with the goal of consciously informing society. In white propaganda, false or suspicious information is not included. If such information is included, it can damage the reputation of the propagandist and diminish the effectiveness of the propaganda. White propaganda aims to assist people in making their own informed choices by presenting information openly and honestly. Unlike other forms of propaganda, white propaganda is based on a foundation of greater transparency and honesty. However, the concept of propaganda itself should be handled carefully since it can have an influential impact on many people's thoughts and behaviors (Talishinsky, 2024). There are a huge number of different propaganda techniques and methods. We can consider some of them:

1. The Method of Multiple Repetition, Also Known as the “Goebbels Method”

This technique involves the endless repetition of the same idea. Such an idea, especially if it is formulated in the form of a simple, easy-to-remember slogan, after repeated repetition begins to be perceived by the masses as truth. It is actively used in those countries where freedom of the media is limited or controlled by the state.

“The masses call the information that is most familiar truth”, wrote Joseph Goebbels. “Ordinary people are usually much more primitive than we imagine. Therefore, propaganda, in essence, must always be simple and endlessly repetitive. In the final analysis, the most outstanding results in influencing public opinion will be achieved only by those who are able to reduce problems to the simplest words and expressions and who have the courage to repeat them constantly in this simplified form, despite the objections of high-brow intellectuals.” (Goebbels, 1934).

2. Primacy Effect

The primacy effect comes into play here - one of the effects of perception, which was formulated in 1946 by the Polish-American psychologist Solomon Asch. Based on the results of his experiment, he put forward a theory that the first message about something makes a

stronger impression on a person than any subsequent information, regardless of the objectivity, adequacy and reliability of the new facts. Asch's experiment consisted of dividing students from the City College of New York into two approximately equal groups, A and B, each was given a portrait of a certain person, a list of his personality traits, and asked to form their own impression of him (Asch, 1946).

3. The Effect of Presence

Includes a number of techniques that are supposed to imitate reality. They are constantly used in “reports from the battlefield” and in crime newsreels, fabricating the filming of a “real” capture of bandits or a car accident after the fact. The illusion of a “combat situation” is created, for example, by jerking the camera and losing focus. At this time, some people are running in front of the camera, shots and screams are heard, fuss and panic. Everything looks as if the cameraman, who is in a hot spot under fire, is risking his own life to film reality. A powerful effect of presence is created, the viewer is immersed in the center of events, not suspecting that what is happening is just an illusion.

The technique is often used in commercial or political advertising. For example, actors pretend that they are “from the people”, deliberately allow pauses, hesitations in their speech, demonstrate uncertainty. We have repeatedly seen happy pensioners accepting “gifts from the administration”, young parents rejoicing over a successfully taken mortgage, deputies ostentatiously scolding utility workers who have fallen into disrepute, etc. The method is primitive, but very effective.

4. Information Blockade

The method consists of eliminating the enemy's ability to publicly state their position. This type of propaganda is closely related to information dominance and censorship. They are used both in the event of military action and in peacetime (for example, during elections). By blocking, restricting and prohibiting, an information vacuum is created on some issue, which leads to increased interest on the part of society. And then information that is beneficial to those who block coverage of the issue is suddenly thrown into the masses. This allows for a single interpretation of current events, while another point of view is practically inaccessible to the general public.

An example of an information blockade is the Tiananmen Square uprising in Beijing in 1989. The Chinese, who were mostly students, who were advocating for the liberalization of the regime were brutally dispersed by the military using tanks. The protests lasted for more than

a month, but the CCP tried as much as possible to prevent the situation in Beijing from becoming public, both nationally and internationally. It is impossible to establish the exact number of victims: according to various estimates, between 200 and 7,000 people died. To this day, this topic is very taboo in China and any mention of the events in Tiananmen Square is blocked.

Conclusion

Propaganda, being an integral part of political communication, has transformed over the centuries from primitive forms of influence to complex and finely structured models of manipulation of public consciousness. Analysis of theoretical approaches - from Helvetius and Lasswell to Ellul, Chomsky and modern critics of digital media - demonstrates that propaganda not only serves as a tool for imposing a certain ideology, but also forms the very structure of perception of reality in the mass subject.

Modern technologies, including artificial intelligence, recommendation algorithms and neuro-linguistic programming, have significantly increased the power of propaganda, allowing the creation of personalized forms of influence. At the same time, as philosophical analysis shows, the true threat lies not in the content of propaganda messages as such, but in the gradual loss of the subject's ability to think critically and perceive information autonomously.

Thus, understanding the nature of propaganda and the mechanisms of its action becomes a necessary condition for preserving democratic institutions, forming genuine public opinion and protecting individual consciousness from manipulative pressure. Only through the development of media literacy, philosophical reflection and free access to alternative sources of information can we resist the dehumanizing potential of propaganda and restore space for genuine public dialogue.

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