This book is published at a time when interest in and awareness of propaganda is escalating. Of course, we do not claim that the relevance of political propaganda is returning, because it never disappeared. To assume that it died with the Cold War is as delusional and self-defeating as thinking propaganda is only organised in the non-democratic or less mature democratic political systems (Taylor, 2002a, 2002b; Herman and Chomsky, 2010). Revelations about Cambridge Analytica and the violent extremist propaganda of Islamic State (IS) demonstrate that the practice of propaganda is not confined to states and governments, while the extraordinary political and social polarisation of the United States (US) during Donald Trump’s presidency and the United Kingdom’s (UK) Brexit referendum campaign confirms that propaganda is also prevalent inside those political cultures that claim a long constitutional commitment to ‘free speech’. It stands to reason that propaganda thrives in an age of ‘post-truth’ uncertainties and so-called ‘alternative facts’. But propaganda does not just speak to the shadier side of modern politics. While communications can incite, divide, cast blame, and confuse, equally they can unite, build nations, promote mutual understanding, help manage a global pandemic, and save lives. Propaganda is still valued as an instrument for advancing all shades of political interests and agendas, and we can detect today the propaganda techniques that defined its practice throughout history (Taylor, 2003; Connelly et al., 2019: 1–12). So, is there anything new to learn?

Transformations in the global media ecology challenge our understanding of political processes, institutions, and actors at both the domestic and international levels. Concerns about the power of social media to disrupt political cultures have given rise to discussions about ‘fake news’, ‘bots’, and ‘trolling’, while the credibility of traditional sources of news and information across the world – the print and broadcast media – is questioned as never before. In democracies and authoritarian political systems alike, professional journalists are routinely labelled ‘the enemy’, and citizen journalism struggles to contextualise information in a satisfactory and accurate way. In turn, news organisations continue to challenge political authority; but also because the social media make it easier for political actors to bypass journalists, news organisations are more mindful than ever of the need to expose misleading statements and falsehoods and to ‘fact check’ information from political sources.

By the autumn of 2018, the Washington Post, the newspaper that was central to both the publication of the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate investigation in the early 1970s, had detected over 5000 such statements since President Donald Trump’s inauguration in 2017, while Time magazine found 1950 ‘false claims’ in 2017 alone. Together with growing uncertainty in the political space with the rebirth of far-right politics across Europe (M5S in Italy), North and South America (the election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil), and Asia (Narendra Modi in India, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines) and issues such as anti-immigration pushing a nationalist turn (for example, President Trump’s so-called ‘Muslim ban’ and the UK’s Brexit
referendum campaign), the new media and information landscape is a driver of government and electoral choice. Communication platforms are now more powerful politically than at any time in the past.

This Handbook begins from the premise that we need to better understand modern propaganda and how political actors seek to influence each other, as well as public opinion and behaviour through strategic communications. In particular the contributors address how social and digital media platforms have moved ‘influence’ away from states and institutions, making the means for shaping communication and public opinion more easily accessible to a broader range of actors. While governments still use propaganda as an instrument of statecraft (for example, the weaponisation of information by the Chinese and Russian governments is well documented), new communication technologies have ‘democratised’ the production and distribution of political propaganda. Through their affordability, accessibility, reach, and popularity, digital platforms empower non-governmental organisations, civil society groups, private corporations, protest movements, and individual actors to engage in their own influence operations. In fact, our participation in the ‘attention economy’ means that even the seemingly trivial acts of ‘liking’ or ‘sharing’ content on social media makes us complicit in ‘the viral spread of propaganda’ (Hobbs, 2020: 69). Every time a liberal journalist or outraged voter retweeted one of Donald Trump’s attacks on journalists, or CNN showed yet more footage of Majorie Taylor Greene’s filmed inflammatory remarks, the original message is amplified and reaches a bigger audience. It also gives the source a level of influence and credibility that perhaps they do not deserve. Propaganda lesson #1: do not draw attention to your opponents’ propaganda. However, this lesson is sometimes forgotten in the social media echo chamber.

Bringing together an international team of commentators, analysts, and scholars, this Handbook offers a fresh, timely, and above all an interdisciplinary perspective on political propaganda. The chapters discuss how propaganda is operationalised in various forms, application contexts, and political systems. Taking the communication perspective, our scope and definition of propaganda centre on its common attributes, namely:

- Its persuasive function.
- Audiences.
- Intentions and agendas for cultivating particular ideas or directing particular behaviours.
- Use of flawed reasoning or emotional appeal.

These attributes derive from descriptions of propaganda identified since the earliest scientific studies of propaganda were published in the 20th century (Lasswell, 1927; Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1937; Welch, 2002; Taylor, 2003; Shabo, 2008; Stanley, 2015).

Hence, the editors acknowledge that we stand on the shoulders of giants. However, eschewing the approach of previous studies that offer a definitional and historical assessment based on an understanding of propaganda largely drawn from experience of 20th century warfare (Taylor, 2003; Welch, 2014; Connelly et al., 2019), most of the chapters in the present volume provide a contemporary perspective. This means that we are analysing a moving target. While we prepared the manuscript, we watched the Trump presidency rise and fall, the sudden eruption of a global pandemic that has transformed almost everybody’s life, Brexit, a military coup in Myanmar in which the military cut all access to the Internet, continuing political turmoil in the Ukraine and war in Yemen, protests in Thailand, the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, and countless other events, big and small. All are interesting case studies of political propaganda: ‘the deliberate attempt to influence public opinion through the transmission of
ideas and values for a specific persuasive purpose that has been consciously devised to serve the self-interest of the propagandist, either directly or indirectly’ (Welch, 2003: xv‒xxi). All have something to tell us about the way modern communications disrupt or reinforce political authority. It was impossible to keep up to date with these events and to attempt to address them all in this book. However, we are confident that the case studies chosen for this volume represent the diversity of ways in which political propaganda is understood and used today.

Contributors interrogate definitions of propaganda to reshape analyses of the 21st century communication space. We are familiar with the idea that propaganda is a value neutral concept, that it is a ‘process for the sowing, germination and cultivation of ideas’ (Taylor, 2003: 2). Scholars reference repeatedly Pope Gregory XV’s creation in 1622 of the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith to indicate both the long history of propaganda’s formal organisation and that it is not necessarily a pejorative activity. We turn to one of the most important scholars of propaganda, David Welch, to understand how this value neutral definition sits with ‘misconceptions’ about propaganda. In his landmark book, The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda, Welch (2002) identifies a series of misconceptions about propaganda: that it is about changing opinions, when propaganda is ‘more often … concerned with reinforcing existing trends and beliefs’; that propaganda deals only in deception. ‘In fact,’ writes Welch, ‘it operates with many different kinds of truth – the outright lie, the half truth, the truth out of context.’ Welch also discusses the idea that propaganda appeals to the ‘irrational instincts of man’, but then notes that ‘because our attitudes and behaviour are also the product of rational decisions, propaganda must appeal to the rational elements in human nature as well’ (Welch, 2002: 5). This underpins Welch’s research on Nazi propaganda that suggests voters were not ‘mesmerised by a well functioning propaganda machine’ into voting for Hitler and the NSDAP (Nazi Party). Explaining the Nazi Party’s success as the result of propaganda alone assumes voters were acting irrationally, instead of accepting that ‘many groups … perceived voting for the NSDAP as being in their own interests and that Nazi propaganda served to reinforce such beliefs … To over-emphasise the importance of propaganda’, says Welch, ‘would be to diminish the failure of the Weimar system to solve prevailing economic and social problems and of political opponents of the NSDAP to provide viable alternatives’ (ibid.: 8). This is an important point: propaganda does not and cannot operate within a vacuum, but must be sensitive to wider social and political trends. Thus, it is essential to understand the context in which propaganda operates: social and economic problems, why people feel so alienated that they are willing to support extremist political parties offering attractive solutions, and why they are so ready to blame their problems on other groups in societies. General Erich Ludendorff’s much quoted explanation of Germany’s defeat in World War One – ‘We were hypnotised by the enemy propaganda as a rabbit is by a snake’ (Ludendorff, 1919 [1940]: 360) – is too bold a claim and attributes to propaganda an undeserving degree of power to influence, one that is separated from military and political failures.

This leads Welch to an important conclusion: the preoccupation with irrational rather than rational behaviour ‘ignores the basic fact that propaganda is ethnically neutral – it may be good or bad. The first task of the student of propaganda is to divest the word of its pejorative and derogatory associations’ (Welch, 2002: 5).

How useful is this value neutral definition today? Is propaganda ‘merely’ another form of persuasion, or does recent history – Donald Trump’s presidency, IS, Cambridge Analytica, virulent nationalism – suggest that this description is no longer fit for purpose? We recognise propaganda used by terrorist groups such as IS to normalise and justify extreme violence
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and lure new recruits with tantalising utopian portraits of the society it wishes to create; and that democratic governments also use propaganda to challenge these misleading ideas (Lieberman, 2017). For a time, British news organisations decided to preface all their reports by saying ‘so-called’ Islamic State – which arguably is bad journalism – thus engaging in a form of counter-propaganda. At the same time, propaganda was used to restore peace in Northern Ireland (McLaughlin and Baker, 2010), while perpetuating the sectarian divisions there (murals, parades, and so on). Propaganda is also discovered in public health campaigns. During the Covid-19 pandemic Britons were encouraged to ‘Stay home, Protect the NHS, Save lives’, and ‘Stay alert, Control the virus, Save lives’ (Waterson, 2020). Thailand adopted a more nationalist message, rolling out a slogan that translates into English as ‘Control the virus for the nation’, while the New Zealand government opted for ‘Be kind, Stay calm’ (BBC News, 2020). Meanwhile, propaganda that spread the idea that Covid-19 was the ‘China virus’ fed into and encouraged anti-China narratives, especially in the US where there existed a notion that the pandemic was not real. Such narratives helped rationalise resistance to control measures such as social distancing and wearing masks in public.

Perhaps the label matters less than the intention after all – Stuart Cunningham (2002: 64) has claimed that ‘There is no unintentional propaganda’ – and anyway, one man’s public diplomacy, public relations, or healthcare warning is another man’s propaganda. Whatever the intention, the label is at the behest of the audiences, not the source of the messages, and we cannot hide from the fact that however much we drive home the idea that propaganda is a value neutral form of communication, it will always resonate with sinister connotations. Why else would the Chinese Communist Party change the name – in English only – of its Propaganda Department to Publicity Department?

Today the literature on influence is dominated by studies of public diplomacy and soft power, the latter too often a universal ‘catch-all’ term that is used by policymakers and academics alike to describe strategic communications via attraction. Some have decided that the concept of soft power is insufficient to capture all the influence activities that governments undertake, and that yet another (quite unnecessary) label, sharp power, is required to describe many of the actions that would have been described previously as propaganda or political warfare. Some think that inventing such new terms adds clarity. It does not.

Moreover, digital diplomacy is today receiving growing attention (Bjola and Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2019), while more considered analyses of the Internet and social media recognise that the democratic vision we talked of not so long ago is in fact becoming suspect (Mozorov, 2011; Moore, 2018). Many of the chapters in this Handbook evaluate how the digital media contribute to modern political propaganda and disinformation, but still acknowledge that we must not ignore other, perhaps more traditional media. After all, most of what we call ‘propaganda’ still occurs on traditional platforms, with the broadcast and print media still the main vehicles of delivery in many parts of the world. In some societies, posters remain important. In China the increase in the number of propaganda posters on view in urban areas reflects the importance that Xi Jinping’s government attaches to influence, while protest movements and non-governmental actors discover old and new ways to disseminate their propaganda. In Barcelona, for example, graffiti is still important for the Catalan movement, while the Internet ‘meme’ reflects the popular creation, circulation, and consumption of political messages and satire that challenge the existing political order. In the aftermath of a coup in Myanmar in 2021, the junta may have cut access to the Internet, but protestors still mobilised throughout the country, and audiences around the world were still able to see coverage of the increasingly
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violent clashes between the military and opponents. Political activism, like political propaganda, will always continue offline.

Again, we need to be mindful of intention. Writing on the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’, Moore says that the mistake of democratic governments and those responsible for digital platforms:

was to assume that their tools were inherently democratizing, when technology was simply enabling new ways of pursuing political ends. Those who say how politically powerful these platforms could be, and used digital tools to pursue their political aims, benefitted disproportionately. It did not matter if these aims were democratic, autocratic or anarchistic. (Moore, 2018: 7)

If the history of propaganda teaches us anything, it is that those who wish to exercise power over public opinion – for good or bad intentions – will always find a way to do so. New communications technologies simply make it possible for a range of messengers beyond state actors and institutions to spread ideas faster and to a more select audience. The blurring of producer, distributor, and consumer complicates our understanding of communications and makes it increasingly difficult to recognise not only propaganda but also the propagandists. The transformation of communicative practices – the often unconscious ‘liking’ and ‘sharing’ of information – also plays a part in reconfirming and reinforcing particular ideas among the same-minded in the echo chamber, leaving less room for critical assessment. Hence, Chapter 28 concludes this volume with an urgent call for greater awareness of digital literacy and the development of skills needed to navigate the new information and communication landscape:

Our stock response to dealing with the circulation of ‘fake news’, or indeed views that we do not support, is to control the info-sphere further still. Our dilemma – balancing the right to freedom of expression with the need to limit our exposure to harmful views or false information – is not so very different from that of our inter-war predecessors, even though the global scope and scale of communications has changed. (Connelly et al., 2019: 3)

Digital platforms are merely the latest in a long line of communication innovations stretching far back before the 20th century that have created new opportunities for propaganda (Taylor, 2003). While this may be the logical conclusion of a technological process – there is a definite resemblance in the techniques, style, and content of propaganda we encounter today and about which we read in the history books – our exposure to more propaganda and the close analyses of the way IS, Cambridge Analytica, Donald Trump, and a host of other actors and institutions have organised their influence activities also suggests a greater opportunity to engage with and question the propaganda we encounter on a day-to-day basis. We hope that this collection of chapters will make such a contribution.

The editors wish to thank all the contributors to this volume. We appreciate your hard work, your patience, and your responses to the reviewers’ feedback. Many of you joined the project at the beginning in early 2019, others towards the end near Christmas 2020. Despite lockdowns, the move to online teaching, and endless Zoom meetings disrupting our lives, we have all managed to produce a fascinating volume of chapters that make a strong contribution to our understanding of modern political propaganda. Thank you.

The editors dedicate this volume to three giants in the field of media and communications studies – the bright lights of the Institute of Communications Studies (ICS) at the University of Leeds – who inspired the editors and so many of the contributors, as well as generations of scholars and students across the world:
Professor Nicholas Pronay, founder of ICS and a pioneer in the field of historical approaches to propaganda.
Professor Jay Blumler, 1924‒2021.

Thank you all for your part in creating and shaping the field, as well as for your warm friendship. We hope you are proud of us, your ‘intellectual offspring’.

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