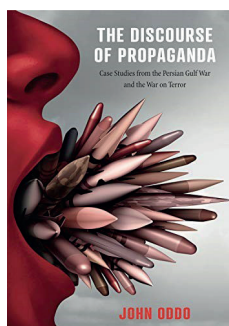




THE DISCOURSE OF PROPAGANDA: CASE STUDIES FROM THE PERSIAN GULF WAR AND THE WAR ON TERROR

by John Oddo

(A Book Review)



We live in the times of fake news. It is present everywhere—in TV programs, periodicals, social media—and even in books categorized as non-fiction. Usually, however, with Internet access and instantaneous availability of many reliable online resources, it does not require a lot of time to fact-check and determine whether a given statement is true or false. It is only occasionally that it does

take an expert to verify controversial issues on the basis of their own, or someone else's, meticulous research. And yet, because men and women of the 21st century are always busy working, taking care of the family, or relaxing, rarely ever are they willing to muster energy or make the time to check facts on their own. As a rule, an average addressee of the news is rather content to “suspend his or her disbelief” and to transfer the responsibility for the verification of information to professionals (who are trusted to possess the expertise in a given field), or to journalists (who are trusted to check their facts before making them news). Moreover, given that audiences are partial to sensation, and that they are always keen to share dramatic information with others, it does not require any expert techniques or particular acting talents to make sure that alternative facts, once

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publicized, will spread like wildfire—without any verification, without a shade of doubt.

The 2018 book by John Oddo titled *The Discourse of Propaganda: Case Studies from the Persian Gulf War and the War on Terror* offers a marvelous insight into the phenomenon in question. Written with a wide audience in mind, it could serve as a textbook for those without any prior knowledge or professional background in the area, who wish to broaden their horizons, as well as a valuable source of materials for academics specializing in the fields of political science, psychology, cultural studies, American-Middle Eastern relations, or linguistics. In his book, Oddo—whose areas of expertise are professional writing, rhetoric, global communication and applied translation—transcends disciplinary boundaries. As he claims:

My research draws on theories of rhetoric, discourse, and multimodality to critically examine how powerful agents use language (and other symbols) to generate support for war. The focal point of my research is “intertextual rhetoric”—that is, rhetoric that operates across texts and across time. I am interested in how US political leaders reuse generic rhetorical techniques to manipulate the public and draw the country into hostilities. I also focus on the ways that media institutions recontextualize and modify the claims of political leaders during the run-up to war—often enhancing the “call-to-arms message.”¹

While his first book titled *Intertextuality and the 24-Hour News Cycle: A Day in the Rhetorical Life of Colin Powell’s U.N. Address* (2014) examines how, and to what ends, the general’s 2003 speech was reported by television news and newspapers, in *The Discourse of Propaganda* Oddo adopts a broader perspective and attempts to shed light upon how propaganda works in general, focusing on the traits of the manipulative discourse that effectively led to the outbreak of two tragic wars: the Persian Gulf War in 1990 and the “War on Terror,” culminating in Operation Iraqi Freedom, in 2003.

The author opens his book with the the explanation of what propaganda is. Drawing on theories developed by various scholars, he seeks to compile the most accurate definition of the phenom-

1. See John Oddo’s biographical note at <https://www.cmu.edu/dietrich/english/about-us/faculty/bios/oddo-john.html> (1 May 2021).

enon. In his view, “a key feature of successful propaganda is that it propagates, reaching enormous numbers of people” (Oddo 2018: 37), who regard elites as authoritative, trusting in what they say. However, because messages generated by the authorities are very often shared among their end addressees, it is important to bear in mind that a successful propaganda strategy must account for the fact that the transmission of information can be both vertical (from the top to the bottom of hierarchy—e.g., from the president to journalists and, ultimately, to their audiences) and horizontal (between or among recipients).

This observation is particularly important especially in the context of the theory of proximization, upon which Oddo’s argumentation concerning mechanisms of manipulation heavily relies. The proponent of the theory, Piotr Cap from the University of Łódź, Poland, defines “proximization” as “[...] a discursive strategy of presenting physically and temporally distant events and states of affairs (including ‘distant’ adversarial ideologies) as increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and her addressee.” (Cap 2014: 17). It aims to induce—or aggravate—fear with respect someone or something and, as the name suggests, relies upon rhetorical devices that make (imagined or real) dangers seem *closer* to the recipient of the message than they are in reality. The perceived proximity of the danger renders it almost tangible, thus triggering emotional reactions in groups and individuals, who may then be inclined to trust the decisions of those designated to protect them, i.e. the political elites. The strategy of scaring masses into obedience—known and used since the times immemorial and perfected over centuries—was, as Oddo’s book demonstrates, successfully deployed by the US authorities to intensify the fear of the Iraqi among the Americans at home. The mechanisms responsible for the success of the strategy in the context of both Iraqi wars are the focal point of the author’s case studies.

The book is organized into seven sections: introduction, four parts, conclusion, and eleven appendices (A-K), containing transcripts of speeches, data sets, descriptions of methods, excerpts studied in the analytical sections, an overview of recurrent themes, and many other materials, potentially invaluable to scholars and scientists, who may wish to use them for analyses within

their own disciplines. Part 1 (“Defining Propaganda and Historicizing America’s Wars in the Middle East”) is further divided into two chapters: 1–“Theorizing Propaganda: Intertextuality, Manipulation, and Power,” and 2–“The Persian Gulf War and the War on Terror: A Brief History.” This section of the book provides readers with a theoretical background to propaganda and propaganda studies, and locates potential applications of theory in a practical context by relating it to discourses presented in a short, but eye-opening, overview of the two wars in Iraq. Sections that follow are subdivided into analytical chapters, each of which focuses on a separate case.

And so, in part 2, “Manufacturing an Atrocity,” consisting of chapters “How the Incubator Story Became News: The Power of Performative Semiotics,” and “Keeping War Fever Alive: The Circulation of the Incubator Story,” the scholar employs the theoretical apparatus presented in the previous section to the analysis of the mechanisms of propaganda related to the infamous Kuwaiti provocation aimed to discredit the Iraqis. The eponymous “Manufactured atrocity” refers to the lie that Iraqi soldiers were guilty of disconnecting newborn babies from incubators and leaving them to die, which was officially propagated as a fact. The author analyzes how the story was circulated and how it was exploited by the US government and media to energize popular support for the war—which allows him a smooth transition into the discourse of Part 3, “Infiltrating Network News.” Subdivided into chapters titled “Message Force Multipliers: Rewarding Recontextualization,” “Enacting and Entextualizing the Voice of the Expert,” and “The Evolution of a Talking Point,” the section focuses on mechanisms of propaganda in the context of verified events and alt-facts that ultimately lead to the launch of the Operation Iraqi Freedom. Finally, Part 4, “The Art of Slogan,” elaborates on how the US administration and the mass media at their disposal used the patriotic slogan “Support Our Troops” during the War on Terror to disqualify anyone critical of their actions as un-patriotic and un-American. Creating a binary divide between devout supporters of the US policy and “traitors,” the US administration rhetorically eliminated any space for patriotic criticism in order to delegitimize opposing voices and to justify their own actions as ethical.

In Conclusion, which collects the most important findings from analytical chapters and points out methodological limitations of the theories employed to explain the central concept of the book, John Oddo offers his readers some predictions for the future and a set of practical guidelines as to how an individual may identify propaganda and how he or she may resist manipulation. Most importantly, however, his findings allow the author to substantiate his claim that:

propaganda is an intertextual process that requires contributions from multiple agents. It can succeed in circulating only if it continually induces new audiences to recognize and recontextualize it on a mass scale. Importantly, the people who create and recontextualize propaganda exist in democracies as well as autocracies. They may be elite actors or ordinary people, powerful agents or “unwitting accomplices” who keep the propaganda alive (4).

The *sine-qua-non* condition of the success of propaganda (a condition certainly met in the case of the phenomena discussed in the analytical chapters of the book) is that *everyone* should become engaged in the process of circulation of a lie: presidents, government officials, journalists, news analysts, corporations, as well as ordinary people who use Twitter, read Facebook, post content on Instagram, or simply talk with each other. Propaganda, as the cover-art of the book clearly suggest, is a weapon: the word may prove as deadly as a missile, if its trajectory is professionally, and ruthlessly, managed.

Propaganda will presumably be with us forever. Its efficiency, however, ultimately depends on informed decisions of individuals, who may or may not decide to make an effort and check facts before they help propagate them. In the world of fake news and alt-facts we cannot afford to seek excuses that could relieve us of our duty of caution. Awareness may save lives: to forgo awareness is to support manipulative discourses that are responsible for human tragedies. John Oddo’s book, opening paths for scholars and scientists to further his research in disciplines they represent, is simultaneously a very important attempt to open his non-academic readers’ eyes and teach them the essentials of self-defense against manipulation. Thereby—it is also a gesture of immeasurable ethical value.

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