

Propaganda Today:  
Russia's Meddling in the U.S. Presidential Election,  
A Historical Lens

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## **Abstract**

Propaganda instills emotion in a public to bring upon a desired action, such as during WWII when the U.S. created Uncle Sam to recruit soldiers and defeat the Nazis by instilling loyalty and even fear. Propaganda is still being used today alongside press agency in means of war and strife, especially through social media (Sledzik, 2018). Currently, “the Russians are accused of hacking the email systems of the Democratic National Committee and conducting a widespread disinformation campaign that included the propagation of fake news stories on the internet and the airwaves” (Goldman, 2017). With an historical lens, this paper will highlight the history and evolution of propaganda from papyrus to the current social media landscape and will focus on how these tactics have been used from 2015 to today in Russia's meddling of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.

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## Introduction

“From the perspective of our modern information and communications age, the word ‘propaganda’ continues to imply something evil. For some it is a cause of wars; for others, it is an even greater evil than war” (Taylor, pp. 1). “To some speakers and writers, propaganda is an instrument of the devil. They look on the propagandist as a person who is deliberately trying to hoodwink us, who uses half-truths, who lies, who suppresses, conceals, and distorts the facts...Others think especially of techniques, of slogans, catchwords, and other devices, when they talk about propaganda” (America Historical Association).

In the third edition of *Munitions of the Mind: A history of propaganda from the ancient world to the present era*, author Philip Taylor writes, “We are all in fact propagandists to varying degrees, just as we are all victims of propaganda” (pp. 2). Propaganda “uses words and word substitutes in trying to reach a goal—pictures, drawings, graphs, exhibits, parades, songs, and other devices. Of course propaganda is used in controversial matters, but it is also used to promote things that are generally acceptable and noncontroversial” (America Historical Association).

There are multiple meanings to propaganda depending on the context it is being used. “[B]efore 1914, propaganda simply meant the means by which the converted attempted to persuade the unconverted. The converted were, and are, not necessarily nasty people with nasty ideas; nor were, or are, the unconverted particularly unreceptive or resistant to what they are told” (Taylor, pp. 4). Propaganda can range from a “selfish, deceitful, and subversive effort to honest and aboveboard promotion of things that are good. Propaganda can be concealed or open, emotional or containing appeals to reason, or a combination of emotional and logical appeals” (America Historical Association).

Propaganda “has always been an additional instrument in the arsenal of power, a psychological instrument, and it is its relationship to power which has attracted suspicion – mainly from the powerless or those resentful of power” (Taylor, pp. 4). “In the struggle for power, propaganda is an instrument to be used by those who want to secure or retain power just as much as it is by those wanting to displace them. For the smoke to rise, there must first be a spark which lights the flame. Propaganda is that spark” (Taylor, pp. 5).

“Propaganda is about persuading people to do things which benefit those doing the persuading, either directly or indirectly. In wartime that usually means getting them to fight or to support the fight” (Taylor, pp. 6). Taylor does not mean to imply “that getting people to fight wars is right, merely that propaganda serves an essential role in persuading people to risk their lives for whatever the reasons or the cause. It is those reasons and causes which should be the legitimate objects of moral and critical analysis and judgement, not the propaganda itself. As such, propaganda can be used for ‘good purposes’, just as it can be abused” (pp. 6).

“Although the scale on which propaganda has been practised has increased out of all recognition in the twentieth century, it is in fact an activity that does date back to the time when human beings first began to communicate with one another. Essentially, propaganda is really no more than the communication of ideas designed to persuade people to think and behave in a desired way” (Taylor, pp. 6). To persuade people, a “conscious, methodical and planned decision...to achieve specific goals that are intended to benefit those organizing the process” must be made (Taylor, pp. 6).

In this perspective, Taylor believes advertising to be the “economic propaganda” (pp. 6). If those at the receiving end also benefit, propaganda thus becomes “publicity,” according to Taylor. He writes, “Public relations is a related communicative process designed to enhance the

relationship between an organization and the public and, as such, is a branch of propaganda, albeit a nicer way of labelling it” (Taylor, pp. 6). “[W]hat distinguishes propaganda from all other processes of persuasion is the question of intent” (Taylor, pp. 7). “Propaganda is part of the struggle for perceptions in which words attempt to speak as loud as actions, and sometimes even to replace the need for action” (Taylor, pp. 8).

Effective propagandists use tools such as suggestion, hints, insinuations, or indirect statements, appealing to the known desires of an audience, and having ideas stick by using key words and slogans, shibboleths, or other symbolic forms (America Historical Association). “A symbol is a concrete representation of [an] idea, action, or thing—a sign that stands for something...A symbol can be a word, a mark, an object, a song, a flag, an image, a picture, a statue, or some collective or grouped representation—anything that conveys a common thought to masses of people. A symbol is a kind of cement that holds together a social group.” (America Historical Association). The history of propaganda has many great examples of these symbols to persuade a public to create a desired emotion or action.

In our current timeline, social media is the most used medium for propaganda. In 2016, businessman and television personality, Donald Trump, ran for United States President and won. During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and since then, the spread of fake news has become almost like an epidemic. Fake news is the term most often used to describe “intentionally fabricate[d] information, disseminate[d] deceptive content, or grossly distort[ed] actual news reports.” (Knapp, 2018). This is propaganda in the current information-sharing world—stories and symbols used to spark outrage and action to either be for or against the ruling Republican political party in the Oval Office. Going as far back as 2015, once the DNC cyber hack by Russia came to light, propaganda and fake news pinning the two extremes of each political party against

each other spread like wildfire through social media (CNN Library, 2018). Not until the Fall of 2017 did the American public realize they'd been deceived by Russia's propaganda when Facebook announced "that more than 3,000 advertisements posted on the social network between June 2015 and May 2017 were linked to Russia" (CNN Library, 2018).

To understand just how the United States became so vulnerable to not only Russia's cyber attack on the election itself, but also to the propaganda that has divided Americans, we first must understand the history of propaganda, how propaganda is so effective, and the history of the U.S.-Russia relations through an historical lens. This paper will research such history with a literature review of Philip Taylor's *Munitions of the Mind: A history of propaganda from the ancient world to the present era*. Next, the timeline that lead up to the U.S. government and Facebook finding out about the hacking and propaganda and the current online media landscape will be discussed. Finally, an overall analysis of Russia's use of propaganda to divide America and hack the election to nudge Trump's win as well as what we as an American public and public relations practitioners can learn from this will be deliberated.

## Literature Review

This literature review will focus on the history and evolution of propaganda from papyrus to the current social media landscape. The history and evolution of propaganda is relevant because one of the ways Russia meddled in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election is with propaganda through social media. To understand how Russia and the U.S. have come to where they are now, we first must look back into the past of propaganda with an historical lens.

The first true historical record of propaganda took place in ancient Greece (before 2000 BC) and Rome. We all know the story of the Trojan Horse as well as the story of Helen of Troy (Taylor, pp. 25). These stories “provide us with an insight into early Greek conceptions of war propaganda techniques” (Taylor, pp. 26). “It would equally be erroneous to assume that propaganda similarly became a less significant factor, either in society or in warfare, after the fall of Rome. War remained a terrifying experience; equally, persuasion remained an essential component of recruitment, morale, and combat motivation. In many respects, propaganda became an even more important instrument of social control, of maintaining the prevailing social, political and religious order...as the struggle to control not only the Church but also the successor states to Rome proceeded. Propaganda provided cohesion, a set of answers in a confusing world” (Taylor, pp. 52).

From about 1337 to 145, propaganda was utilized to persuade and motivate support for warfare. Finally, with the “growth of universities as recognized centres of learning in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and, perhaps more significantly, with the production of cheap paper replacing expensive parchment in the first half of the fifteenth century, the way was open to capitalize upon printing as a means of catering for the increasingly literate population of Europe.” (Taylor, pp. 87-88). This opened up the opportunity to mass produce and mass spread

propaganda all around the world, pushing forward to the rebirth of the Renaissance and Reformation periods.

“Like an ascending curve on a graph, the eighteenth century witnessed both an expansion in the role of public opinion in affairs of state and an increase in the degree to which the Press was accordingly utilized as a political instrument” (Taylor, pp. 129). Newspapers became “the principle medium of eighteenth century propaganda” (Taylor, pp. 131). While “wars between the great powers were comparatively scarce, smaller conflicts began to receive widespread publicity by virtue of developments in communications” (Taylor, pp. 159). “Not only did the press communicate political ideas to the people, it also conveyed public opinion to the politicians” (Taylor, pp. 160). With the arrival of modern mass media, war in the twentieth century “now became a matter for every member of the population, a struggle for national survival in which the entire resources of the nation – military, economic, industrial, human, and psychological – had to be mobilized in order to secure victory or avoid defeat (Taylor, pp. 173).

During WWI, Germany had invaded Belgium and France. Britain ending up joining the war to attempt to end it. However, with both Britain and Germany tired and military morale low, large propaganda campaigns were implemented from both countries to recruit support from the neutral United States. Germany “promptly and blatantly poured propaganda material into neutral America, using the German-American societies or bunds as their distribution agents” while for Britain, it was “essential to disguise from the American people the fact that the massive bulk of paper material they were receiving from Britain about the war – pamphlets, leaflets, cartoons, and even the news itself – was emanating from Wellington House under Foreign Office guidance” (Taylor, pp. 177). America sided with the allied British side.

“After 1917, propaganda became a fact of everyday life. For revolutionist and politician Vladimir Lenin and his successors [in the Soviet Union], who owed so much to the successful employment of propaganda in securing power at the expense of the tsars, propaganda also became an essential ingredient in the ideological war against capitalism and the struggle for world revolution” (Taylor, pp. 198). “A major obstacle to Lenin was the illiteracy of the mass of the Russian people and thus the relatively limited role which newspapers could play,” so they introduced the poster, which “like the icon, could present symbols in a simple and easily identifiable way, even to barely literate peasants” (Taylor, pp. 199-200). The Soviet Union also introduced cinema to push their messages, and although “the Soviets pioneered new methods of domestic propaganda that were watched with great interest by other countries, it was their foreign propaganda that caused most concern abroad” (Taylor, pp. 203).

“In Germany, Hitler began his rapid rise to power and was appointed Chancellor in 1933. He then began to dismantle the Weimar democracy and establish the Nazi totalitarian state using many of the propaganda methods pioneered by the British and the Soviets” (Taylor, pp. 206). “By the late 1930s, in other words, propaganda had become an established fact of everyday life. International broadcasting, State-controlled cinemas and newspapers, public opinion polls, mass rallies: all these were new features of an age characterized by an ideological struggle with world-wide dimensions thanks to the technology of the communications revolution. As such, truth was a major casualty long before the actual fighting began” (Taylor, pp. 207).

“The Second World War witnessed the greatest propaganda battle in the history of warfare...Modern democracy and totalitarian dictatorship had both emerged from the First World War and 1939 was a testimony to their mutual incompatibility. There followed a struggle between mass societies, a war of political ideologies in which propaganda was merely one, albeit

a significant, weapon” (Taylor, pp. 208). In 1933, England engaged in war with Germany—the start of the Second World War. England focused on major censorship and journalistic control; however, propaganda was shared that no censorship was taking place. “Propaganda, therefore, is as much about what is not said as about overt expression” (Taylor, pp. 216).

Propaganda “consisted of ‘attracting the crowd, and not in educating those who are already educated’. And for Hitler, the crowd was brutal, violent, emotional, corrupt, and corruptible. Propaganda was designed to attract followers from this broad mass of the population, organization was designed to attract members of the party” (Taylor, pp. 241). “Of all the media, Hitler...[was] most interested in film, and it was the newsreels that served to drive home the German cause and the glory of German military supremacy in the early years of the war” (Taylor, pp. 244).

After America entered the Second World War, “Hollywood was quick to mobilize and in the next four years kept up a relentless pace of film production that was to serve the national propaganda effort well. As Roosevelt stated: ‘The motion picture industry could be the most powerful instrument of propaganda in the world, whether it tries to be or not’” (Taylor, pp. 229). After D-day, tons of films were created about individual and collective stories of victory, or of loss, and this was used as propaganda.

“Nazi propaganda identified patriotism with propaganda to such an extent that, once the Allies had reached Berlin, they knew they would have to embark upon a comprehensive post-war programme of de-Nazification” (Taylor, pp. 248). “Denazification was propaganda to eradicate propaganda, an entire psychological programme to eliminate totalitarianism and militarism” (Taylor, 249). The following Cold War was “a contest of ideologies, a battle of nerves which, for the next forty years or so, was to divide the planet into a bi-polar competition that was

characterized more by a war of words and the threatened use of nuclear weapons rather than their actual use” (Taylor, pp. 250).

“In the United States, the start of the Cold War was accompanied by a hate-inspired anti-Soviet propaganda campaign that permeated all aspects of American life, especially between 1947 and 1958” while the Soviets portrayed Americans as the enemy of communism. (Taylor, pp. 259). “With the death of Stalin in 1953, the Soviet Union also experienced a significant domestic propaganda campaign in the form of Khrushchev’s ‘de-Stalinization’ programme and his denunciation of the former leader’s ‘cult of personality’” (Taylor, pp. 262).

“As a consequence [of nuclear weapons], international diplomacy appeared to be developing by the 1950s into a great game of bluff, counter-bluff and double bluff all set against a climate of terror. Because both sides had to project the impression that they were in fact serious and that this was not a game of bluff, an atmosphere was created in which propaganda could only flourish” (Taylor, pp. 251). With the science and technology of bomb-making growing more destructive and precise, propaganda “had to ensure that fear of the enemy was sustained at a higher level than fear of the bomb (Taylor, 253).

In 1962, “Many officials were...arguing that propaganda was becoming as important to diplomacy as gunpowder had been to the conduct of war. The problem was that it was becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain precisely where the word-weapons were coming from thanks to increased covert involvement by the secret intelligence services” (Taylor, pp. 265). “Soviet radio was broadcasting 1200 hours a week to foreign countries, of which only 250 were directed at Western Europe...The Americans accordingly renamed psychological warfare into psychological operations while Soviet ‘active measures’ continued to spread *dezinformatsia*.

This became a great game between the CIA and KGB to discredit the other side – by spreading rumours” (Taylor, pp. 266).

“Psychological operations were, then, no longer being confined to the traditional battlefield, for the battlefield had become the global information environment” (Taylor, pp. 267). “Many propagandists working in various western information agencies argued that the Soviets always held the initiative because their propaganda was so interwoven with their policy. The western democracies had to learn that, in order to survive an ideological confrontation, they would need to fight fire with fire. Moreover, the increasing intrusiveness of the mass media into political life required greater attention to presentational skills on the domestic front, giving rise to the recent age of media politics” (Taylor, pp. 268).

With the entry and retreat of the Vietnam War, the 1960s “saw democratically elected politicians becoming increasingly sensitive to what they saw as the power of television to sway public opinion” (Taylor, pp. 272). “[M]ost people were now gaining most of their information about what was happening in the world from television rather than from the older media of press and radio. By its inherent predisposition to simplify, television thus became an ideal medium for propaganda, as terrorist groups around the world recognized” (Taylor, pp. 274). “The 1980s saw a massive expansion in international satellite television broadcasting and the arrival of such global news services” (Taylor, pp. 282).

The Gulf War of 1991 was “hailed as the ‘first information war’ partly because of the effective use of new technologies, especially satellites, computers and communications, in support of the war effort” (Taylor, pp. 289). “The media were such a prominent feature of the propaganda effort on all sides that the illusion was given of an information overload in terms of the war coverage” (Taylor, pp. 289). “Instead of inter-state conflicts like the Gulf War, a series

of intra-state conflicts broke out around the world which attracted high-profile media attention not least because, since they were effectively civil wars, they produced dramatic images of human suffering that played to the heart and evoked cries for the international community to 'do something' to stop the terrible tragedies being played out before a global television audience" (Taylor, pp. 298-299).

"[J]ust as power supplies, television stations and radio transmitters have become the primary targets of information-age warfare, perception is a vitally important and worldwide conflict space" (Taylor, pp. 311). "What was now being labelled asymmetric warfare had arrived. This phrase essentially means that militarily strong nations like the United States, which can unleash overwhelming firepower, are nonetheless vulnerable in certain areas that weaker opponents can exploit. Information in the global media 'space' is one such area unless the voice of the enemy can be silenced" (Taylor, pp. 309). By the time 9/11 occurred, mass media technology had increased tenfold. "The Taliban understood the 24/7 global news cycle...The global information environment had become so porous and so fast that the waging of any strategic information campaign could no longer merely be confined to the traditional mass media front" (Taylor, pp. 317).

"Image and reality must go hand-in-hand if a nation's actions are to be perceived in a desired way. Otherwise, the world's sole surviving superpower will merely be seen to be wielding what has become another dirty 'p' word, namely power" (Taylor, pp. 319). With the emergence of the Internet and social media, it has become more difficult for propagandists because "they are forced to deal with a world as it might be rather than with constructing justifications for actions that have already taken place. In such a world, image may have nothing

to do with reality. And in a world where image is everything, reality has nothing to do with 'facts' or 'the truth'. The only truth is power" (Taylor, pp. 319).

Understanding the effect propaganda has on war, perception and the truth and how different mediums can strategically propagate to certain publics is important in understanding how Russia was so effective in spreading propaganda online. To conduct further thorough research on this topic, I need to see how Russia spread propaganda online so easily and effectively. I also need to research just how dependent the American public is of social media and if anyone had realized it was propaganda before President Trump entered office and Russia was outed and charged of meddling in the Presidential Election.

## Discussion of Findings

In order to properly discuss how Russia meddled in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, there needs to be an understanding of the events in chronological order.

- Starting in September 2015, “the FBI contacts the Democratic National Committee's help desk, cautioning the IT department that at least one computer has been compromised by Russian hackers” (CNN Library, 2018).
- Then in March 2016, something as simple as a phishing email masked as an alert from Google popped up in Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta's email (CNN Library, 2018).
- In June, “The Washington Post reports hackers working for the Russian government accessed the DNC's computer system, stealing oppositional research on Donald Trump and viewing staffers' emails and chat exchanges. The Kremlin, however, denies that the government was linked to the hack, and a US official tells CNN that investigators have not yet concluded that the cyberattack was directed by the Russian government” (CNN Library, 2018). Rumors spread like wildfire over how the DNC was hacked and from who.
- By July, “The FBI announces it has launched an investigation into the DNC hack. Although the statement doesn't indicate that the agency has a particular suspect or suspects in mind, US officials tell CNN they think the cyberattack is linked to Russia” (CNN Library, 2018).
- In September, “During an interview with Bloomberg News, President Vladimir Putin says that he and the Russian government have no ties to the hackers. He says that the identity of the culprit or culprits is not as important as the content of the leaks, and

ultimately the hackers revealed important information for voters” (CNN Library, 2018).

By the end of September, “Democrats Dianne Feinstein and Adam Schiff, ranking members of the Senate and House Intelligence Committees, issue a joint statement declaring that based on information they received during congressional briefings, they believe that Russian intelligence agencies are carrying out a plan to interfere with the election. They call on Putin to order a halt to the activities” (CNN Library, 2018). “The New York Times reported Russian hackers not only hacked the DNC but also accessed computer accounts of Republican lawmakers and GOP organizations (CNN Library, 2018).

- In October, “DCLeaks, a self-described collective of ‘hacktivists’ seeking to expose the influence of special interests on elected officials, publishes a batch of documents stolen from Clinton ally Capricia Marshall. DCLeaks is later identified as a front for Russian military intelligence” (CNN Library, 2018).
- In December, “The Washington Post reports the CIA has determined that Russian hacking was conducted to boost Trump and hurt Clinton during the presidential campaign. The Trump transition team dismisses the CIA's findings...Sources tell CNN that although US intelligence agencies share the belief that Russia played a role in the computer hacks, there is disagreement between the CIA and the FBI about the intent of the meddling” (CNN Library, 2018). “President-elect Donald Trump has rejected out of hand any suggestions of Russian influence on the election -- despite the CIA concluding that Russia acted to help Trump win” (Diamond, 2016). Right before the end of 2016, “President Obama issues an executive order with sanctions against Russia. The order names six Russian individuals who allegedly took part in the presidential campaign

hacking. Additionally, 35 Russian diplomats are ordered to leave the US within 72 hours” (CNN Library, 2018).

- On January 5-6, 2017, “After the president and the president-elect are briefed, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence releases a declassified version of its classified report on Russian meddling. According to the report, hackers did not breach voting machines or computers that tallied election results but Russians meddled in other ways. Putin ordered a multifaceted influence campaign that included spreading pro-Trump propaganda online and hacking the DNC and Podesta. Bracing for a possible Clinton win, Russian bloggers were prepared to promote a hashtag #DemocracyRIP on election night. Paid social media users, aka ‘trolls,’ shared stories about Clinton controversies to create a cloud of scandal around her campaign” (CNN Library, 2018).
- Not until June of 2017, Putin said “that hacking during the presidential election campaign may have been carried out by patriotic Russian citizens who felt compelled to respond to perceived slights against Russia from America. Putin says, however, that the Russian government played no role in the cyber attacks. During an interview days later, Putin says that a child could have easily hacked the American presidential campaign” (CNN Library, 2018). However, Mike Pompeo, Secretary of State, said, “I am confident that the Russians meddled in this election, as is the entire intelligence community...This threat is real” (Vesoulis and Simon, 2018).
- In July, a bipartisan bill “limiting Trump's power to ease sanctions against Russia passes in the House by a 419-3 vote” (CNN Library, 2018). Trump signed the sanctions bill, thus Putin announced, “755 employees at US diplomatic missions in Russia will be ousted from their posts in response to sanctions” (CNN Library, 2018).

- In September of 2017, “Facebook announces that more than 3,000 advertisements posted on the social network between June 2015 and May 2017 were linked to Russia. The Washington Post reports that the ads came from a Russian company called the Internet Research Agency” (CNN Library, 2018).
- In October, “CNN publishes an investigation of Russian trolls who posed as a group of Black Lives Matter activists during the presidential campaign. They used a variety of platforms including Tumblr and Pokemon Go to reach voters” (CNN Library, 2018).
- In April 2018, a report released by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence said, ““In 2015, Russia began engaging in a covert influence campaign aimed at the U.S. presidential election”” (Vesoulis and Simon, 2018). ““The Russian government, at the direction of President Vladimir Putin, sought to sow discord in American society and undermine our faith in the democratic process”” (Vesoulis and Simon, 2018).
- The investigation continues until July 13, 2018 when the Justice Department “announces indictments against 12 members of the Russian intelligence agency, GRU, as part of special counsel Robert Mueller's ongoing investigation. The indictment alleges that the Russians of engaging in a sustained effort to hack emails and computer networks associated with the Democratic party during the 2016 presidential campaign” (CNN Library, 2018). Many Americans believe when President Donald Trump “appeared to accept Russian President Vladimir Putin’s denials of Russian meddling in the 2016 election Monday, he wasn’t just breaking with Special Counsel Robert Mueller. He was also disagreeing with U.S. intelligence agencies; two congressional committees that investigated the issue; his own Defense secretary, director of national intelligence and

national security adviser; and private cybersecurity experts” (Vesoulis and Simon, 2018).

In July, Trump stated, “My people came to me, [Director of National Intelligence] Dan Coats came to me and some others, they said they think it’s Russia. I have President Putin; he just said it’s not Russia...I will say this: I don’t see any reason why it would be” (Vesoulis and Simon, 2018).

Propaganda in the digital age, according to theorist John Oddo, is “manipulative and antidemocratic discourse that ‘harms the Many and serves the Few’—involves an intertextually rich communicative 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’” (Hodges, 2018). Propaganda persuades people to go to “one source. If you can get over that one hurdle, it’s much easier to persuade or brainwash people, because they are only listening to that source that they deem most credible. Then you simply repeat, repeat, repeat. You can do different forms, but you keep the same theme. So people literally internalize it as truth” (Wood, et al, 2017).

Social media reaches more people than previous communication technologies could prior. “But it's also a false sense of control over the filter because I have the ability to filter people out or filter sites out, and then welcome them into my newsfeed. So I think that I have control over the information that I'm receiving, but in fact if I'm continuing to receive false information from a source I think I should trust then I'm still being manipulated. So that's what compounds the problem here. People don't really turn on their filter and say, ‘hey, maybe I should be really judgmental about this information because I chose to subscribe to this or I actually shared this website or I friended this person’” (Wood, et al, 2017).

Social media is “so easy to access. It's on your phone, it's on your tablet, it's on your computer. It's ubiquitous. And then their friends, neighbors, virtual friends, actual friends — they all talk about it. They all have access to it. So in some ways you feel out of the loop if you're not accessing it completely through social media. Since you feel that pressure you're going to try to be more informed and then you want to self-justify that time and energy, so you're like ‘oh yeah, that's true’” (Wood, et al, 2017).

“An indictment filed in court by Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel investigating Russian interference in the election, laid out for the first time, in riveting detail, how Russia carried out its campaign on social media” (Shane, 2018). The indictment said “many Americans engaged with the Russian trolls without knowing who or where they really were” (Shane, 2018). “Some defendants, posing as U.S. persons and without revealing their Russian association, communicated with unwitting individuals associated with the Trump campaign and with other political activists to seek to coordinate political activities,’ the indictment said. Among others, it said, the Russians contacted ‘a real U.S. person affiliated with a Texas-based grass-roots organization,’ who advised them to focus their efforts on ‘purple states like Colorado, Virginia and Florida’” (Shane, 2018).

“They were politically active Americans scattered around the country, dedicating their spare time to the 2016 presidential campaign or various causes” (Shane, 2018). “Facebook has disclosed that about 130 rallies were promoted by 13 of the Russian pages, which reached 126 million Americans with provocative content on race, guns, immigration and other volatile issues” (Shane, 2018).

Blacktivist was a popular Facebook page posing as a Black Lives Matter support group found linked to Russia. “Jeff Hancock, a psychologist who heads Stanford University's Social

Media Lab, says that propaganda via a page like Blacktivist was not aimed at changing [people's] mind[s]. It was actually meant to trigger strong feelings” (Sydell, 2017). ““When we have more confirmation that a possible risk is there, whether it's real or not, we perceive it as more risky,’ Hancock says” (Sydell, 2017). So, in the case of Blacktivist, if someone was already worried about police brutality towards people of color, then the more times they are exposed to those images the stronger they will feel about it, Hancock says. (Sydell, 2017). “This kind of propaganda, he says, is designed to enhance divisions among people and increase ‘the anger within each other. It's really truly just a simple divide-and-conquer approach” (Sydell, 2017).

Blacktivist and other groups like it were “phony groups, part of a sweeping Russian disinformation campaign that was funded with millions of dollars and carried out by 80 people operating out of St. Petersburg, Russia” (Shane, 2018). “Another potent example is the Twitter account @TEN\_GOP, which had more than 100,000 followers. It called itself the unofficial account of the Tennessee Republican Party. But it was purportedly set up by Russians. The account has since been shut down. But for months, it sent out a stream of fake news such as a tweet falsely stating that there was voter fraud in Florida. That sort of news got plenty of amplification. Though there is no evidence that President Trump or any of his supporters knew of the Russia link, the account was often retweeted by his aide Kellyanne Conway and the president's son Donald Trump Jr. Donald Trump himself thanked the account for its support” (Sydell, 2017). This “showed the power of just one Twitter account and its ability to ‘actually influence the discussion and be cited in the debate.’ Watts says this kind of media propaganda is simply how it works in the digital age, whether it's the Russians, the North Koreans or a fake news site” (Sydell, 2017).

“Propaganda ultimately relies upon the recontextualization of messages to gain traction and propagate. The social media ads placed by Russian trolls are a case in point. By inducing ‘likes’ and ‘shares,’ ads like these hold the potential to go viral, much like the conspiracy theory tweets about Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School students being ‘crisis actors’” (Hodges, 2018). “[S]ome kinds of discourse are intrinsically more shareable than others’...‘performative semiotics play an important role in rendering discourse extractable,’ citing parallelism, repetition, and dramatic pauses as examples of poetic devices that make discourse more likely to be entextualized and repeated. In the online world, one should add that shock value enhances the intrinsic worth of tweets and posts. The more deliberately offensive or provocative a post, the more likely it will be shared. Trolls thrive off this maxim” (Hodges, 2018).

“Propaganda must also be detachable and mobile. Social media platforms build this capacity into the technologies, making retweeting, reposting, and sharing messages easy to achieve with a simple click. Automated propaganda bots—created and controlled by human propagandists—can help circulate messages online, amplify the number of shares, and catapult messages to trending topics. Bot creators sometimes create hashtags and ‘use their bots to amplify them until they’re adopted by human users’” (Hodges, 2018). Propaganda “‘spread collectively by a diffusion of participants’...The humans behind propaganda bots may be involved in a deliberate campaign to disseminate manipulative messages (vertical propaganda), but the success of the campaign requires the participation of others who help to collectively circulate the messages (horizontal propaganda)” (Hodges, 2018).

So, where do we go from here? Facebook “has promised more transparency about who is behind the advertising campaigns. Twitter says it will no longer take ad money from two Russian media outlets, RT and Sputnik. Despite efforts by Facebook, Twitter and Google to take action

on their own, Democratic lawmakers are pushing legislation that would require Internet platforms to disclose more information about political ads” (Sydell, 2017).

“How are we to make sense of today’s propagandistic messages, which seem to increasingly occur online in the form of fake news? Facebook election ads created and promoted by Russian trolls. Tweets that accused students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School of being ‘crisis actors.’ A president who invents facts to bolster his worldview. These and other examples are the twenty-first century’s version of propaganda, and they are aimed at spreading disinformation and sowing ignorance, division, doubt, and fear” (Hodges, 2018).

“Making sense of propaganda in the age of social media requires recognizing with Oddo that ‘propaganda is a distributed activity—a dialogic process.’ In other words, ‘it is not quite accurate to speak of a single propagandist who intentionally delivers a self-serving message to the masses.’ We are all part of the intertextual web of influence that comprises our democratic society. How we use our voices in that intertextual web, though, is ultimately up to us” (Hodges, 2018).

## Analysis

If there's any takeaway from the literature review of this paper, or any other history textbook for that matter, there are many reasons why Russia would want to see the fall of democracy, especially in the United States. On the political philosophies of those before him, Putin advocates for communism and believes democracy is illegitimate.

On July 16, 2018, President Trump had a joint briefing with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Putin had said "that while he had 'great confidence' in the U.S. intelligence community, [he] was 'extremely strong and powerful in his denial' that Russia meddled in the 2016 U.S. presidential election" (Macias and Higgins, 2018). Putin blamed "'both countries' for the strained relationship" (Macias and Higgins, 2018). "'The Russian state has never interfered and is not going to interfere into internal American affairs including election process,' Putin said during the briefing alongside Trump" (Macias and Higgins, 2018). "In a statement posted to Twitter later [the same day as the briefing], the president said he had confidence in the U.S. intelligence community... 'It is crucial that we fine tune the stability and global security and nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction,' Putin said" (Macias and Higgins, 2018).

So, while both countries are speaking, it doesn't mask the fact more and more evidence is coming to light of Russia's meddling in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and propaganda was one of its largest weapons of use (Macias and Higgins, 2018). "The fact that wars give rise to intensive propaganda campaigns has made many persons suppose that propaganda is something new and modern. The word itself came into common use in this country as late as 1914, when World War I began. The truth is, however, that propaganda is not new and modern. Nobody would make the mistake of assuming that it is new if, from early times, efforts to mobilize

attitudes and opinions had actually been called 'propaganda.' The battle for men's minds is as old as human history" (American Historical Association).

Taylor writes, "in an age of propaganda, the only course of action open to us is to learn to identify it for what it is – merely a process of persuasion that forms a part of everyday life. It can be used for good or ill, just like any other form of communication, but its very pervasiveness in contemporary society is a reflection not just of the multiplicity of media but also of the plurality of mediators who exist for getting us to think – and do – something which serves their vested interests. Those interests may, or may not, coincide with our own. If they do, we tend not to label it as propaganda. They become our shared value system, our common set of 'truths'. It is only when we meet someone from outside this system, whose views of the world are quite different from our own, that we can begin to appreciate that there may be another way of looking at things. We can accept or reject that different way" (pp. 321). "Ultimately, therefore, propaganda is about sides. Whether or not something is branded as 'propaganda' depends upon which side you are on" (Taylor, pp. 322).

Like the Internet, "by its inherent predisposition to simplify, television thus became an ideal medium for propaganda, as terrorist groups around the world recognized" (Taylor, pp. 274). "It is comparatively easy for an outsider to identify such a strong propaganda climate within another society. However, if one is actually living through it, such dispassionate analysis becomes virtually impossible" (Taylor, pp. 300). The American public was so immersed in the 2016 Presidential Election with emotions running high, along with the trust of their social media feeds, most Americans did not even recognize what they were viewing as propaganda.

Overall, Russia's meddling in the U.S. Presidential Election is a negative example of how propaganda is used today, especially in the public relations industry as press agency/publicity,

one of the four models of communication, and political public relations. Press agency is a “one-way style of communicating where an organization pumps out information, often through a press agent...Another word for this might be ‘propaganda’ because messages are often based on emotional appeals that can be presented as only part of the information or that has been distorted in some way...Message comes through someone, often a press agent or a publicist, or some channel (think Twitter) and there isn’t necessarily an emphasis on accuracy. It’s more about emotional appeals” (Roginson). “While many PR professionals today have abandoned this form of promotion, it appears that press agency [was] alive and well in the 2016 political campaign” (Ferris, 2015).

Donald Trump ran “his campaign in full press agency style. He has (and some might argue still does) used the media masterfully, even if what he states on television and social media does not represent reality...*The New York Times* reported that 76% of Trump’s statements made since 2007 have been ‘mostly false or worse.’...Throughout his campaign, Trump has [and still does] made controversial statements about Mexicans, women, veterans, the disabled, and...Muslims. In fact, one can barely turn on the radio or television, or surf on social media today without seeing his name” (Ferris, 2015).

Assistant Professor of Communication at The University of Akron Wayne College, Amber Ferris believed “[p]erhaps press agency should be saved for marketing circus side-shows and celebrities, and leave the political arena to more ethical forms of public relations. However, only time will tell as to the ultimate success of this strategy. Trump’s popularity has never been stronger, and his supporters are more vocal than ever,” resulting in his win as the 45th United States President (2015).

It is clearly apparent Americans fell victim to Russia’s social media propaganda

campaign. Whether it pushed Trump to win over Clinton isn't important in this paper. The fact the United States is one of the most powerful military countries in the world does not mean it is therefore impenetrable to the information-wars of propaganda, especially with the vastly quick nature of social media as its medium.

## Conclusion

To most, propaganda means half-truths, lies, suppression, concealment and the distortions of facts. Propaganda uses persuasion to procure an emotional reaction. The long history of propaganda has been around since humans have been able to communicate, and has been used most often as a tool of power and war. Russia's propaganda campaign targeting Americans on their social media was effective because it stirred high emotions blocking logic and reason and was repetitive until it became the "truth." It was coming from one source, an individual's personal social media account, ensuring that individual trusted what they read or saw as truth, even if it was not true at all.

I believe this paper supports the fact that more research needs to be conducted on how to identify propaganda and fake news in today's social media-driven world. For example, just as Taylor mentioned, depending on what side you're on, the new movie, 'Death of a Nation' could be seen as propaganda. "Dinesh D'Souza, who pleaded guilty to violating federal campaign finance laws in 2014,...release[d] a documentary film that makes comparisons between the Democratic resistance to Trump and how 19th century Democrats rejected President Abraham Lincoln's re-election during the Civil War" (Robert, 2018). "'Lincoln united his party and saved America from the Democrats for the first time. Can Trump—and we—come together and save America for the second time?' the filmmaker tweeted" (Robert, 2018).

The takeaways of this paper are improving internet security, especially for government officials, and improving the education of identifying propaganda and fake news, especially when on a medium you trust. As public relations practitioners, it is our duty to ensure our public is informed and educated so that they may make their own fully-formed opinions. It is also our job

as public relations practitioners to only spread the truth and to stay away from the one-way form of communication that is press agency, or really propaganda.

Lastly, the study of propaganda's history in Eastern, African and South American cultures is just as important as it is for European and American cultures. More research needs to be done in regards to expanding the history and therefore understanding of propaganda. Perhaps only then, we will be able to gain a better grasp of not falling victim to propaganda in today's modern society.

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