

## The profit made from war and words

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Only 8% of the last 3 400 years of recorded history, it has been claimed, have been entirely peaceful. We know this because there is little else we have so fastidiously recorded as our conflicts. If we were able to take a high-speed look at human geopolitical history, the result would be a flurry of warring feudal States, civil wars splitting and reuniting nations, empires swelling and collapsing, and pre-colonial territories being colonised before gaining their independence. Many scholars and historians would call this progress, a justified end to such conflicts, they might say. The implication of this is that conflict and war are a means; a tool we apply to get certain – often political – results. We could, for example, look at Genghis Khan, who wreaked havoc and devastated the landscape of his time, the result of which was open trade and religious freedoms where previously there were none. Whether these means are themselves justified is irrelevant. That they're effective, is all-important. Winning a war often comes down to winning an arms race. Having an advantage, however small, can make all the difference. Shaka, for instance, dominated neighbouring tribes because, in part, he altered his army's spears slightly, making them shorter and more versatile. In similar fashion, a significant and powerful advancement has continued to develop and evolve over the past couple of centuries – that being propaganda.

It is in documenting our conflicts that propaganda first began. It is the victors, after all, who write history. Generally speaking, human history is about as intertwined with war as Bruce Wayne is with the Batman. More so, in fact, because unlike the billionaire and his vigilante alter ego, they're almost always seen together. Where there has been bloodshed, there have been those who desire to tell us what happened, how it happened, and why it happened. We can imagine the many reasons why they may have this desire: perhaps they want their own name associated with the event, as with Homer and the Iliad; or perhaps they wish to frame their involvement in a particular light, as with Julius Caesar and his conquest of Gaul. Nonetheless, it is a well enough known fact today that nothing sells newspapers like bad news. We might then say that profit is the new progress.

For instance, the Daily Mail's circulation prior to the First World War grew exponentially from 945 000 to over 1.5 million within the first weeks of August 1914. More recently, in 2002, Richard Murdoch's Fox News managed to increase its viewership by 300% during the US and Iraq conflict. With the power to improve newspaper sales, television viewership and even presidential ratings (known as the rally 'round the flag effect), it's not surprising that currently there are only about ten nations globally uninvolved in some form of conflict. War, ladies and gentlemen, turns a mean profit.

More than profits, the fact that words have been imbued with the power to start, maintain, and even win wars is of further interest. As the German supreme commander of World War I, Erich Ludendorff (the younger), would attest, "Today words have become battles. The right words, battles won; the wrong words, battles lost." British newspapers, such as Lord Northcliffe's Daily Mail, would go on to make such an impact on the outcome of the First World War that Hitler would later call it an inspired work of genius, even tasking Goebbels with its emulation for the Nazi cause. This belief was echoed by Ludendorff, who attributed the disintegration of the German army as well as that of civilian morale to "mischievous and lying propaganda", further lamenting that "we were hypnotised... as a rabbit is by a snake".

The British media and government of the early 20th century – to a significantly more effective degree than any other nation – used propaganda to sway the sentiments of different audiences in different ways. Against the enemy, disinformation was used to create ruses and subterfuge, while in an effort to recruit more young men to enlist, they employed messages encouraging shame and guilt. And, to incite public opinion with disgust and anger, they painted a monstrous enemy who was willing to commit inhuman atrocities. We'll take a look at why the latter of these deserves a little more attention than the rest.

Prior to Britain joining the French and Russians against the central powers, the British press flagrantly exaggerated German atrocities in Belgium. This very much echoed what American media mogul, William Randolph Hearst, had done several decades earlier with his trademark yellow journalism – noted for its overall lack of substance. Historians consider this a

turning point in the history of propaganda, in which an international conflict was precipitated by media action. Hearst and his colleagues pummelled the American public with exaggerated and even fabricated atrocities the Spanish had committed in Cuba in an attempt to incite the American public's outrage. Succeeding eventually with the outright lie that the Spanish had sunk an American warship in the Havana Harbor, and killing more than 250 US sailors, a global war was soon declared with Spain.

The Rape of Belgium, as it would come to be known, was a page right out of Hearst's book. The actual story was nowhere near as bad as the papers would have the English public (or the rest of the world) believe. Although the German troops had, in fact, murdered civilians en masse (some sources claim around 6 000 executions of men, women and children), claims of German soldiers eating babies or hanging nuns between church bells in order to ring them to death were hard to believe, and near impossible to corroborate. Historian Sidney Fay, within ten years of the Great War, concluded that newspapers were its underlying cause. Her accusation was that newspapers poisoned public opinion through exaggerating points of dispute, making fertile ground for a real war. Many similar disputes were so deeply ingrained in the German public that they simmered beneath the surface until someone with the ability to stoke them up again would arrive.

As alluded to earlier, Hitler was much inspired by British propaganda in the First World War. Believing it to be an effective weapon, he aptly afforded it the necessary resources. However, with greater experience at sentiment manipulation, British propaganda would once more evolve in the sophistication with which it was applied. When the British ministry of information was reinstated for World War II, claims historian David Welch, it had to be aware of the cynicism with which the public now regarded propaganda. In effect, the public had wised up to its baser tricks of shame inducement and exaggeration. And so, in response, a newer, subtler and more sophisticated propaganda would be employed.

So subtle and pervasive was this new stuff that some of it persists to this day. As an illustration, we still hear the story that carrots improve vision. Although generally good for eye health, carrots cannot actually improve vision. This slightly overstated truth is the result of a British disinformation campaign to confuse the Germans. As was the tactic, the Luftwaffe would cross the English Channel and bomb the muddy isle under cover of darkness. In the interim, however, the English developed vital new technology: radar. This new early warning system meant the RAF were able to scramble fighters to intercept German bombers far more effectively. However, to keep the Germans in the dark about the technological advancement, another reason was devised for their new success. The Ministry of Information released a story that pilots were eating an excess of carrots to improve their vision. Needless to say, the Germans ate it up, and began feeding their own pilots carrots too.

In the decades that came to pass following World War II, the sophistication of war and propaganda would reach new heights. Although we still have conflict today, war – at the scale seen in previous times – is not so much required to bring about the desired geopolitical ends they did in the past. We seem to have begun to exclude the middleman then: where propaganda was a means to win wars, and war was a means to bring about geopolitical change, the trend now is to bypass war and go straight to propaganda. For example, Brexit, a massive geopolitical movement wherein Britain voted to leave the European Union, appeared to take place without so much as a single shot being fired. But how, exactly?

Two words: personalised propaganda. Voting manipulation during Brexit and the US election are a frightening reality to wake up to. When the story broke that Cambridge Analytica had harvested user behaviour data and ran it through their models to predict and influence voting behaviour at the ballot box, my blood ran cold. So sophisticated is this new form of propaganda, that we are targeted with personalised (political) advertisements that are, in combination, pretty much guaranteed to sway mass public sentiment to achieve results that were previously only possible with conflict and war. Not only are these messages appearing in and amongst the conversations we have with friends and family on, for instance, social media, but they are tailored to the motivations that you, as a unique individual, find so central to your way of life. Fear that one's way of life is being undermined seems to be a highly influential message behind the recent movements of both Brexit and Trump's rise to the US presidency. We are, it seems, at yet another important turning point in the history of propaganda, where words have now truly become wars.