

Democracies and War Propaganda in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Although the existence of propaganda in liberal democratic states is frequently denied it continues to play a central role especially with respect to war and conflict. Propaganda, understood as a non-consensual approach to influencing beliefs and behaviour, involves a variety of manipulative techniques including deception through lying, omission and distortion as well as incentivization and coercion. Also, it is generated across multiple sites including government, media, academia, think tanks, NGOs and popular culture. A preliminary analysis of the 2011-present Syrian War and UK propaganda indicates how a range of non-governmental and civil society actors, purportedly independent but many with links to Western governments, have been involved in promoting Western government narratives regarding the war and underpinned a misleading impression that Western governments are bystanders to the conflict. As such, the role of the UK in fostering ‘regime-change’ in Syria has remained obfuscated with serious consequences for democratic control over foreign policy.

Keywords *Propaganda, Strategic Communications, deception, Syria, War, Media*

Overview

In general academics, politicians and publics do not have a very strong grasp of the role of propaganda within democracies. Indeed, across elite groups in society, which include politicians, journalists who work for the corporate media and major public service outlets and academics, the idea that propaganda is central to democratic societies is usually met with laughter or anger. The idea that the public mind is being manipulated by powerful actors is sometimes treated as absurd or simplistic. At the same time, those people who are a part of the elite political centre ground perceive themselves as free from the influences of propaganda, uniquely positioned to understand what is true and what is false in the world around them. Propaganda might be something that the extreme right or the extreme left partake in, or it might be a problem with respect to foreign interference (witness the claims regarding alleged Russian meddling in Western politics), but it is not a problem vis-à-vis ‘mainstream’ media and political discourse.

This chapter takes issue with this belief so far as it applies to war and conflict and argues that war propaganda is central to contemporary democracies and, in fact, so central that democratic credentials of those states is in doubt. The chapter starts by defining what is meant by the term propaganda, describing its historical roots and helping explain the current lack of awareness of propaganda. The chapter then explores the case of the 2011-2019 Syrian war in order to highlight some of the key features of propaganda activities in contemporary democracies (focusing on the United Kingdom). This exploratory case study, based upon on-going research,ⁱ indicates the multiple sites at which propaganda can be seen to be generated and, more broadly, helps us to understand how and why publics have been misled as to the reality of Western government involvement in the Syrian war. In conclusion, it is argued that it is untenable to see the Syrian War propaganda as an aberration or unique case and that, instead, it is indicative of a malaise in contemporary democracies. Until these propaganda activities are properly addressed, genuinely democratic politics involving honest and consensual debate will remain out of reach.

What is Propaganda?

Over time the term *propaganda* has come to be understood to mean highly manipulative and deceptive persuasive communication that occurs mainly in authoritarian political systems or, in a democracy during the exceptional conditions of war. The academic study of propaganda reflects this understanding with a large volume of literature exploring propaganda during wartime (especially World Wars One and Two, and now increasingly the Cold War era) or exploring propaganda in non-democratic states. As argued elsewhere (Bakir, Herring, Miller and Robinson 2019) this perception is incorrect. In fact, propaganda has been an integral feature of democratic political systems since the early 20th century. Propaganda, or non-consensual organized persuasive communication (Bakir et al 2019), involves organized attempts to promote particular agendas through a complex array of communicative techniques which are principally manipulative in nature and involve various forms of deception as well as incentivization and coercion. For example, deception can occur through straightforward lying but also, and more commonly, through omission, distortion of facts and misdirection (Bakir et al 2019). As such, the promotion of one-sided interpretations of an issue can be profoundly deceptive via omissions and distortions. At the same time when sources present themselves as independent and neutral, whilst actually being funded and supported by particular political actors, this is also a form of propaganda through deception. Propaganda can also include incentivization and coercion. An example of the former is the promise of tax cuts during election campaigns. An example of the latter is the dropping of surrender leaflets in battle zones whereby the threat of lethal force is part of persuading combatants to surrender (Bakir et al, 2019). The latter two propaganda tactics also highlight the fact that propaganda is about more than just messaging via linguistic and visual communication but can also involve action in the ‘real’ world and so-called ‘propaganda of the deed’. The common thread throughout all of these persuasive communication techniques is that they involve a *non-consensual* process of persuasion: people are persuaded to believe something or to act in a particular way either through deception or because they have been incentivized or coerced. In short, their beliefs or actions are not freely chosen. Propaganda, then, is primarily manipulative in nature and, in general terms, incompatible with democratic requirements pertaining to free debate and citizen autonomy. Citizens who have been deceived, incentivized or coerced cannot be accurately described as having formed their opinions freely.

A reason why contemporary elites and publics have insufficient awareness of quite how undemocratic their supposedly democratic political systems actually are is that propaganda has been obfuscated by a euphemism industry which has sought to relabel propaganda as *public relations (PR)* or *strategic communication*, to name two of many examples. Indeed, the 20th century propagandist Edward Bernays recollected that ‘propaganda got to be a bad word because of the Germans ... using it [during the First World War]. So what I did was to ... find some other words. So we found the words Counsel on Public Relations’ (Bernays cited in Miller and Dinan, 2008: 5). Philip Taylor noted how a euphemism industry has prevailed across Western democracies whereby terms such as *public relations*, *strategic communication* and *perception management* have come to be used to label activities that would have historically been referred to as propaganda (Taylor 2002). He states that this rebranding exercise has been used to conceal the fact that democracies use propaganda. With respect to ‘business propaganda’, otherwise known as *advertising*, Carey (1997) notes that its success ‘in persuading us, for so long, that we are free from propaganda is one of the most significant achievements of the twentieth century’. In short, although ubiquitous to modern democracies, awareness of propaganda has been largely erased from our collective consciousness.

Running hand-in-hand with this lack of awareness is a relatively weak understanding of the number and range of institutions in modern democracies that can and do become involved in propaganda activities. Often, when people think of propaganda, they think of governments and states as its primary source. However, as detailed recently (Miller and Robinson 2019; Robinson 2018; 2019), many institutions can become involved in either the production or relaying of propaganda. For example, Herman and Chomsky (1988) have famously described how mass media function largely as propaganda tools for powerful political and business interests whilst universities, for a similar set of reasons, can also become a part of propaganda activities (Herring and Robinson, 2003). Both journalists and academics work within large organisations with commercial imperatives and shared interests with other powerful actors (e.g. government and big business) and this inevitably creates a broad structural-level constraint on their activities. Both are also frequently reliant upon ‘official sources’ for information and, when putting forward arguments that challenge power, can be subjected to unfair criticism or ‘flak’. Think tanks (Parmar, 2004; Scott-Smith, 2014) and NGOs (non-governmental organisations) can also be involved in propaganda, pushing manipulated and deceptive information into the public sphere in order to promote particular agendas. Finally, across popular culture, propaganda and ideological imperatives have been identified, which include associations between the intelligence services and media industries (Schou 2016; Secker and Alford, 2019). None of this is to say that all of these institutions are inherently propagandistic. Only that they can and do become caught up in

propaganda activities and in ways which are incompatible with normal and justified expectations regarding their roles in a democratic society: we reasonably expect mass media to relay truthful and accurate news, that our universities are places for independent and rigorous research and teaching free from the influences of power, that think tanks and NGOs when promoting an issue do so in a way that avoids manipulative communication (such as deception, incentivization or coercion). Examples of propaganda across some of these 'sites of production' will be highlighted in the subsequent section that explores propaganda and the case of the 2011-19 war in Syria.

As is in all wars (Taylor, 1992), the Syrian conflict has been accompanied by sharply differing perspectives and extensive propaganda. The focus of this exploratory case study is to identify some of the key mechanisms through which Western public perceptions of the war have been shaped. However, before doing so it is necessary to briefly describe the war and the predominant ways in which it has been presented to Western audiences.

Background to the War and Western Political and Media Narratives

Civil disturbances and violence started in Syria in 2011 and occurred against the backdrop of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. By 2012, violence had escalated and a leaked US Department of Defense report stated that the conflict was taking a 'clear sectarian direction', that 'the Salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood, and AGI are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria' and that multiple external actors were involved: 'The West, Gulf countries, and Turkey support the opposition; while Russia, China, and Iran support the regime'.ⁱⁱ One important element of the war, at least from the perspective of understanding the position of Western governments, is the US-Saudi covert operation known as *Timber Sycamore*. The operation was described by the *New York Times* as a '\$1 Billion Secret C.I.A war in Syria' (Mazzetti, Goldman and Schmidt, 2017) and involved an agreement between the CIA and Saudi Arabia aimed at supporting groups seeking to overthrow the Syrian government (see also Berger 2016 and Porter 2017). Recent work published by investigative journalist Maxime Chaix (2019) claims that Operation Timber Sycamore can actually be traced as far back as October 2011 when the CIA was operating via the UK's MI6 intelligence service in order to avoid having to seek Congressional approval. Today, after eight years of war, it appears that the Syrian government is close to regaining control of most of its territory although the future dynamics of the conflict remain uncertain.

In broad terms, Western politicians and mainstream/corporate media have largely presented the war as a simple struggle between pro-democratic rebels and a ruthless regime. This representation of the war has emphasized allegations of war crimes against the Syrian government (alleged use of chemical weapons against civilians and torture) and downplayed both the sectarian nature of opposition groups and the extensive involvement of external actors other than Russia and Iran. Other perspectives have remained marginalized across Western media. For example, Syrian, Russian and Iranian claims that the Syrian government has been engaged in a legitimate fight against domestic and foreign-backed 'terrorists' have been well within the 'sphere of deviance' (Hallin 1986), rarely articulated in Western mainstream media and political debate. A recent study (Frohlich, 2018), based upon an extensive analysis of media reporting, government 'public relations' and NGO communications across a series of conflicts including Syria, confirmed that Western media reporting tended to reinforce government positions (Frohlich and Jungblot, 2018: 103). One chapter in this study noted the absence of Russian media and Russian perspectives from European parliamentary debates responding to the alleged use of a chemical weapon in Syria, 2013 (Berganza, Herrero-Jimnez and Carratala, 2018). Another recent study, on war correspondents, noted how coverage of the death of journalist Marie Colvin by CNN 'focused heavily on the apparently ahistorical evil of the Assad regime, glossing over any tough questions about the international politics that may have contributed to the war in Syria (Palmer, 2018: p. 152). Palmer also notes the political bias in Colvin's own reporting:- 'Colvin herself was also aligned with western political sentiments in this report ... Rather than serving as an objective eyewitness, then, in death Colvin was linked to a very distinctive political perspective' (Palmer 2018: 154 & 157).ⁱⁱⁱ

That Western media have aligned themselves with those of Western governments should come as no surprise. Academic works have repeatedly and consistently evidenced the close proximity between media and government positions especially during war (e.g. Paletz and Bennett, 1994; Hallin, 1986; Robinson et al 2010) as well as the prevalence of war propaganda (Taylor, 2002) in which conflicts are cast in simplistic and dichotomous terms, good vs. evil. It would be very surprising if future studies of western media coverage of the Syrian war would find any evidence that significantly diverges from the two studies described above.

But what has contributed to the dominant ‘narrative’ regarding Syria? What follows is a preliminary outline of what we understand to be important elements of how the information environment has been shaped with respect to the war in Syria and the focus here is on elements associated with the UK.

UK-linked ‘StratComm’ Operations

A feature of UK policy toward the war in Syria is that, whilst the UK government has, along with the United States, supported the removal of the Assad government from power, much of this has been via covert means. As with the US-Saudi covert operation *Timber Sycamore* mentioned above, the UK has not ‘intervened’ in the way that it ‘intervened’ in Iraq 2003, but has instead provided a range of support activities to opposition groups some of which have played key parts with respect to influencing the ‘information environment’.^{iv} These include provision of ‘PR’ support to opposition groups, creation of the so-called ‘White Helmets’ first responder NGO and the utilization of a former UK military officer as part of both gathering evidence of alleged chemical weapon attacks and relaying allegations of chemical weapon attacks.

Specifically, in 2015 former Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Tilley established InCoStrat in Turkey, having been awarded funding from the UK government for media support for ‘moderate armed opposition’. Activities included producing ‘videos, photos, military reports, radio broadcasts, print products and social media posts branded with the logos of fighting groups, and effectively run a press office for opposition fighters’ (Cobain, Ross, Evans and Mahmood, 2016). According to Cobain et al (2016), these activities occurred in close co-operation with the UK FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office). The White Helmets NGO has become (in)famous for those closely following the war in Syria; some argue they are a genuinely independent humanitarian organization established in order to protect and save civilians (Di Giovanni 2018) whilst others argue that they are closely aligned with militant opposition groups and serve a key role in terms of generating propaganda that is favourable to the Western official narrative (Beeley 2015). The White Helmets were established by a former British military officer, James Le Mesurier, and the brand name first appeared in August 2014 (McKeigue, Mason, Robinson and Miller, 2019a). Since then, the UK government has been a major source of funding to the White Helmets, funneling resources via the Syria Resilience Programme of the Conflict Security and Stability Fund (CSSF) through to Mayday Rescue which was the NGO established by James le Mesurier to provide support to the White Helmets. The US government has provided support via USAID awarding of contracts to an NGO called Chemonics. As such, Chemonics and Mayday Rescue train and support the White Helmets on behalf of the US and UK governments.^v Importantly, a UK government summary document published online highlights the dual role of the White Helmets as both a means ‘of supporting and lending credibility to opposition structures within Syria’ and to ‘provide an invaluable reporting and advocacy role’ which ‘has provided confidence to statements by UK and other international leaders made in condemnation of Russian actions [in Syria]’.^{vi} Because the White Helmets operate only in opposition areas, they present only a partial picture of the war and one that, inevitably, presents events from a perspective conducive to the Western narrative. Finally, former British military officer Hamish de Bretton-Gordon established a company called SecureBio in 2011 and was subsequently involved in the establishment of a CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear) taskforce based in Aleppo 2013/2014 (McKeigue, Mason, Miller and Robinson, 2018a). As well as having been involved in covert activity relating to the collecting of evidence regarding chemical weapon attacks for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and UN, de Bretton-Gordon has also been a prominent source for journalists with respect to alleged chemical weapon attacks in Syria. Although presented as an independent expert by journalists, and despite his involvement in gathering samples for the OPCW/UN, there is evidence linking de Bretton-Gordon with UK intelligence services (McKeigue et al, 2018a, 2019b).

The UK government-related activities indicate the existence of a well-organized influence operation, aimed at providing support to opposition groups, feeding back positive images of heroic rescuers saving the victims of Syrian and Russian military operations, and reinforcing a frequently made allegation that the Syrian government has been systematically using chemical weapons against civilians. It would also appear that this ‘influence operation’ is propagandistic in nature: it clearly represents an attempt to promote one perspective regarding the war, as opposed to an attempt to engage or present competing perspectives whilst the actors involved are clearly not fully independent of key belligerents (United Kingdom, US and Syrian opposition groups). Many of these activities are at arms-length from the UK government with former British military officers as well as private companies and charitable organisations being the deliverers. But the funding and political links are reasonably clear to see. Indeed, some of these operations can be traced to Kevin Stafford-Wright, a Lt-Colonel until 2012, who described himself as being involved in an MOD StratCom programme (2012-2015) that was “the UK’s largest of its kind since the Cold War”. Specifically, tender documents

issued by the FCO for opposition media ops, eventually awarded to Paul Tilley's InCoStrat, were created by Stratford-Wright (McKeigue, Miller, Mason and Robinson, 2019b).

'Independent' Social Media Researchers

Another important factor in shaping the information space has been the role of apparently independent social media actors. In fact, from very early on in the conflict there were attempts to utilize so-called citizen journalists as a way of promoting anti Syrian government/pro Western narrative messages. For example, in 2012 US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton authorized the 'training for more than a thousand (Syrian) activists, students, and independent journalists' in order to promote her regime-change policy preference (Clinton, 2014: 464). In the UK context the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) has become a major source of casualty information on the war for UK media (Meyer, Sanger and Michaels 2017). Remarkably, in one study, SOHR were found to have almost three times the number of citations compared with established NGOs such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Meyer, Sanger and Michaels 2017: 158-159). Another social media actor is the Bellingcat open-source intelligence website led by its relatively well-known founder, Eliot Higgins. Over the course of the Syrian War Higgins and Bellingcat have established a reputation for their investigation of alleged chemical^{vii} weapon attacks in Syria and are drawn upon by mainstream media journalists and, indeed, at times celebrated by Western mainstream media organizations (e.g. *New York Times*, 2019). Others have criticized these social media actors, arguing in particular that Bellingcat promote narratives broadly consistent with Western foreign policy objectives as well as engage in the 'trolling' of academics and experts who challenge their analyses.^{viii}

The degree to which these two social media actors are fully independent and neutral is clearly open to question. For example, UK journalist Peter Hitchens established that SOHR had been in receipt of an FCO grant worth 200K to provide 'communications equipment and cameras' (Hitchens 2018) whilst others have noted that SOHR is in fact run by one person once described in a Reuters interview as a 'prominent Syrian activist' and who was aligned against the existing Syrian government (Reuters 2011). With respect to Bellingcat, founder Eliot Higgins has held a position at the NATO aligned think tank the *Atlantic Council* as a non-resident fellow at their 'DFR lab' whilst Bellingcat is in receipt of grants from organisations such as the National Endowment for Democracy which has been described as 'a largely state-sponsored arm of the United States government' (Hitchens, 2019a).

'Controlling the Narrative' through Smear Campaigns

US investigative journalist Sharyl Attkisson (2017) has recently described in detail how smear campaigns have become a key tactic in contemporary politics through which political ideas and debate are stifled via nefarious attempts to destroy the reputation of individuals who hold particular views and say particular things (see also Samoilenko, Icks, Keohane, Shiraev, 2019). A recent high profile example, and one for which there are *prima facie* grounds for believing there has been an organized smear campaign, concerns the allegations of anti-semitism in the UK Labour Party (Philo, Berry, Schlosberg and Miller, 2019). With respect to Syria, academic Louis Allday described in 2016 the experience of people who raised questions in public with respect to the war in Syria (Allday 2016). He writes:

In the current environment, to express even a mildly dissenting opinion, point out basic but unwelcome facts such as the presence of significant public support for the government in Syria, or highlight the frequently brutal acts of rebel groups, has seen many people ridiculed and attacked on social media. These attacks are rarely, if ever, reasoned critiques of opposing views; instead they frequently descend into personal, often hysterical, insults and baseless, vitriolic allegations.

To what extent such activities might be co-ordinated and part of organized smear campaigns is unclear. However, the recent case of the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media and the attacks on it does provide a *prima facie* case that smear campaigns have indeed been part of a more organized attempt to manage dissent. This working group was established in January 2018 and consisted of around 20 academics interested in the study of propaganda and the War in Syria. A particular focus of concern for some of its members was with respect to alleged chemical weapons attacks in Syria and the role of the aforementioned White Helmets. Almost as soon as the working group had been established and before it had produced any substantive material, the former *Guardian* journalist Brian Whitaker (2018a,b&c) had written and blogged a series of articles attacking various members of the working group as 'conspiracy theorists' or 'Assadists'. In April 2018 the alleged chemical weapon attack occurred in Douma, Syria, and within seven days the US,

France and UK were carrying out airstrikes on Syria in response. As these airstrikes were underway the *Times* of London (Keate et al., 2018; Keate, 2018; Kennedy, 2018; The Times, 2018) published a total of four articles attacking the working group and which included a front page article and an op-ed which, to all intent and purpose, called for the firing of the academics. The front-page story lead with the ‘conspiracy theorists’ allegation suggesting the academics were denying war crimes in Syria by questioning alleged chemical weapon attacks. Soon after the Times articles, senior editor of the UK Huffington Post (2018a-d, 2019a-b) published a series of articles attacking various members of the working group reiterating allegations of war crimes denial and conspiracism. Other activities of interest including the setting up of Wikipedia pages for the most high-profile members of the working group which were then tendentiously edited. Two UK-based academics have also been involved in repeatedly smearing members of the working group.^{ix}

Despite their work on alleged chemical weapon attacks in Syria having been attacked as ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘war crimes denial’, in 2019 documents were leaked from the OPCW (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) (Wikileaks 2019) which indicated OPCW senior management had suppressed information during the investigation which indicated the alleged attack had not occurred. In October 2019 *The Courage Foundation* (2019) convened a panel at which an OPCW scientist briefed a panel of eminent individuals and which included the first Director General of the OPCW, Jose Bustani and Professor Richard Falk.^x The panel made a public statement with respect to errors and irregularities during the OPCW investigation all of which suggested that, contrary to the official OPCW position, an attack was unlikely to have occurred. Prominent UK journalist Peter Hitchens ran articles on these revelations in the UK newspaper *Mail on Sunday* (2019) whilst *La Repubblica* (2019) also covered the story. Hitchens was subsequently smeared as an ‘Assadist’ and attacked by Bellingcat/Eliot Higgins and his Wikipedia page was subjected to tendentious editing; *La Repubblica* were attacked over social media by Bellingcat (Eliot Higgins).

As already noted, the extent to which these attacks reflect the existence of a co-ordinated campaign aimed at stifling academic and journalistic inquiry is unclear at this point. At the same time, the remarkable intensity and scale of attacks against relatively unknown academics, and focusing on an issue that some OPCW officials themselves have felt compelled to speak out on, is indicative of some level of co-ordination aimed at inhibiting what by any standard would be considered reasonable discussion and debate. In fact in 2019, *Times* columnist Oliver Kamm admitted in public that he had initiated the Times attack on the UK academics and later stated that the late James Le Mesurier (founder of the White Helmets) had asked The Times to keep up the pressure on the academics (McKeigue, Mason, Robinson and Miller, 2019a). A senior academic and journalist Brian Whitaker have both claimed over social media to have sources and inside knowledge of, for example, the OPCW. It is also relevant that these events occur against the backdrop of a large-scale UK government funded propaganda operation known as the Integrity Initiative (McKeigue, Miller, Mason and Robinson, 2018b). This operation sought to establish clusters which included journalists and academics and with the aim of countering foreign ‘disinformation’ and shoring up official narratives on Russia and UK foreign policy in general. Leaked documents confirmed that two of the journalists, Deborah Haynes and Dominic Kennedy, involved in the *Times* attacks on the academics were listed as cluster members (McKeigue, Miller, Mason and Robinson, 2018b).^{xi}

In sum, further research is needed in order to establish the extent to which these smears are a part of an organized campaign aimed at discrediting and indeed having fired the academics in question. However, the observable output of these actors and both their public and private statements indicate at least some level of direction and co-ordination.

Discussion and Conclusions

Further research is necessary and is indeed underway into the propaganda operations associated with the 2011-present war in Syria. This chapter, however, presents at least a preliminary sketch of some of the more important aspects of ‘information operations’ thus far identified and documented and allow for an initial assessment. First and foremost, it is clear that much of Western ‘regime-change policy’ with respect to Syria has been conducted through covert means. The previously mentioned Operation *Timber Sycamore* was a massive covert operation in alliance with Saudi Arabia and aimed at arming and supporting sectarian groups in Syria and most other Western military operations (i.e. special forces) have been ‘under the radar’. It appears that ‘information operations’ have been conducted in a way that is compatible with the covert nature of Western involvement in the war.

A brief comparison with the 2003 Iraq invasion is instructive here. That war was initiated under the full glaze of media and public attention whilst the US and UK governments conducted extensive propaganda campaigns aimed at mobilizing public support for the invasion (see for example Kull and Ramsey, Mearsheimer 2010, Herring and Robinson, 2014). Much of this was conducted using state institutions such as the intelligence services who, now notoriously, became involved in the promotion of inaccurate and false information regarding Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

In the case of Syria, evidence indicates that promotion of Western government narratives has involved what, at first glance, appear to be civil society actors that are independent of the state such as the 'White Helmets', Bellingcat, and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. At the same time, substantial activities aimed at influencing the 'information environment' ('PR' support to opposition groups, 'lending credibility to opposition structures' via the White Helmets, and activities related to relaying information regarding alleged chemical weapon attacks) have been carried out by former UK military officers and often utilizing companies and charities receiving UK government funding. The handful of academics and journalists raising questions regarding the war in Syria have been subjected to remarkably fierce smear campaigns which appear to utilize mainstream media journalists and academics.

In short, just as Western attempts to overthrow the Syrian government have been largely covert so have 'information operations' according to the evidence analysed thus far. The Iraq invasion was presented and sold to the public via official briefings and intelligence dossiers. The evidence presented in this chapter indicates that the Syrian war has been presented to western publics via purportedly independent actors to varying degrees promoting partial and 'pro-Western government' views of the war and underpinning a misleading impression that the UK and US governments are neutral bystanders to the conflict. More work is needed on Syria and, moreover, further work is warranted in order to assess the extent to which similar mechanisms of propaganda are being more widely deployed across political spheres, including domestic politics and other non-military related issues. Of particular concern for further academic inquiry is the extent to which state-led propaganda activities are now 'out-sourced' to purportedly neutral civil society actors and buttressed by organized smear campaigns.

Overall it appears that these propaganda activities have been remarkably successful. Public understanding of the war has likely remained confused at best. Commenting on MSNBC news in 2018, Professor Jeffery Sachs stated:

We know they sent in the CIA to overthrow Assad, the CIA and Saudi Arabia together in covert operations ... This is the permanent state, this is the CIA this is the Pentagon wanting to keep Iran and Russia out of Syria ... and so we have made a proxy war in Syria, it has killed 500, 000 people, displaced 10 million ... This happened because of us ... we started a war to overthrow a regime, it was covert, it was Timber Sycamore ... a major war effort shrouded in secrecy never debated by Congress, never explained to the American people ... and this created chaos ... contrary to international law, contrary to the UN charter.^{xii}

And yet it is not apparent that almost any mainstream Western media or any politicians actually understand this or ever say anything about it. In fact, the drive by Western governments to overthrow the Syrian government can reasonably be interpreted as simply the latest in a series of 'regime change wars' which were initiated following 9/11 and which have involved extensive propaganda operations (Robinson 2017). Indeed, these propaganda campaigns are becoming increasingly well documented. For example, documents published by the UK Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War showed US President George Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair secretly discussing military action against multiple countries including Iraq, Syria and Iran as well as the need for a 'propaganda' campaign (Robinson, 2017). The 2003 invasion of Iraq is now widely accepted as an instance where propaganda and deception were used to promote the invasion of Iraq (e.g. Herring and Robinson 2014, Mearsheimer, 2010) whilst the *Washington Post* has recently published stories based upon the vast quantity of documents recently leaked that highlight official deception with respect to the 18 year-long war in Afghanistan.

What does this all mean with respect to propaganda and contemporary Western democracies? Certainly, in the realm of foreign policy it is difficult to convincingly sustain the idea that there exists meaningful democratic control over foreign policy at least in the UK and the US. Political systems sufficiently free from propaganda would not have done such a manifestly poor job with respect to enabling accurate discussion over recent major wars (Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria). The extent to which an array of state and superficially

non-state actors now appear to be engaged in promoting belligerent foreign policy agendas is clearer today than at any point since 2001. This state of affairs is both problematic and dangerous: democracies require accurate information, openness and freedom of debate if they are to function properly; governments that are unrestrained by basic democratic checks and balances and who have a demonstrated track record of belligerence are likely to continue to make war. The 2020 crisis regarding the US and Iran, following the US assassination of Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani and which threatened a major regional and global escalation, is only the most recent reminder of this problem. Without doubt, there needs to be greater academic, journalistic, political and public attention to the problem of war propaganda in contemporary liberal democracies.

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Appendix: Final email from author to the Publisher sent January 2022

Dear Tim (Gary Rawnsley and co-editors also copied in)

I too am sorry that this situation has arisen and that my chapter has been targeted by the same actors that have relentlessly smeared me and others for many years. It is ironic that a chapter in a book on propaganda is being attacked and suppressed by the very same actors it discusses and who have been exploiting powerful platforms to smear researchers for over 3 years now. What you are experiencing is precisely the issue discussed and documented in the chapter. ...

I will therefore need to take legal advice. Can you therefore please clarify for me who has provided you with legal advice and the nature of the threats/complaints (I already have the email Oliver Kamm sent to you).

In the meantime, regarding the two legally risky issues to which you refer, I have already responded to the issue of allegedly anti-Semitic material elsewhere on the website upon which the article I linked to in footnote nine resides. I repeat my comments again here (these were sent to Gary who forwarded them to you):

'Anti-Semitism is a serious charge and based on a single footnote in which I reference a website article providing background re the Oliver Kamm-Neil Clark legal case. I cited the article because it provides a detailed extract from Neil Clark's blog regarding Kamm's alleged harassment and online stalking. None of the article referenced contains any anti-semitic material and nor does my chapter. I make no reference, obviously, to any other material that is contained on the website and citing the article is in no way an endorsement of any material that might be found elsewhere on that website. The results of this legal case are now pinned to Neil Clark's twitter feed <https://twitter.com/NeilClark66/status/1241047240753516544?s=20>.'

This noted, if there are genuine legal risks, I see no reason why the matter cannot be dealt with via a minor edit. Specifically, the reference to the article in footnote nine can be replaced noting the legal dispute has ended and linking to the agreed statement on Neil Clark's twitter feed: <https://twitter.com/NeilClark66/status/1241047240753516544?s=20>.

Regarding the allegedly risky reference to 'trolling', in addition to the reference to the Postol-Higgins debate in footnote 8, a link can be provided to the attached tweets where Higgins states 'Ted Postol is a joke, why would I debate him?' and 'For those who missed it, here's a short summary of my debate with Ted Postol: "fuck you"'. There is ample further evidence in the public domain showing Higgins using abusive language (e.g. 'suck my balls' and referring to people as 'idiots') whilst his book 'We are Bellingcat' (published by Bloomsbury) refers to the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media as 'known for conspiracy theories' and 'fringe' but without providing any evidence for this nor engaging with any of the detailed analyses we have published. But I think the first two tweets are sufficient to demonstrate the online conduct of Higgins.

However, if your lawyers still believe there is legal risk, the reference to 'trolling' can be replaced with 'attack'.

I understand the financial pressure publishers are under, and would be willing to discuss covering some of the typesetting etc costs to which you refer. Regarding the possibility of legal actions, the contract I signed already states that I am responsible for any legal action:

'10. I agree to indemnify and hold the Editor harmless against any claims, demands, suit or action, proceeding, recovery or expense of any nature whatsoever arising from any claim or infringement of copyright or proprietary right or from claims of libel, obscenity, unlawfulness or invasion or privacy based upon or arising out of any manner or thing contained in my contributions to the Work or from any breach of Warranties and representations herein contained.'

Finally, and in the spirit of academic freedom and free expression, I would ask that you consider the following when reviewing issues related to 'reputational risk'. The chapter I wrote provides an accurate and documented overview of attempts to 'control the narrative' on Syria and the OPCW. It does so with evidence and providing readers (via references) the opportunity to read alternative views on some of the actors in question and references the hit pieces. The actors that the chapter raises critical questions about have had ample opportunity to express their views over the last three years and have done so with the support of powerful and influential publishers. Moreover, my chapter received three reviewer reports all of which endorsed the work for publication.

Furthermore, the OPCW issue is one of significant international importance, has been reported on by mainstream journalists and written about in academic publications (as noted in my detailed response sent to Gary Rawnsley and forwarded to you). I take this opportunity to attach a redacted email sent by a senior OPCW official (not one of the two OPCW inspectors who have raised concerns in public and which has been redacted to protect identity) which might provide you with a sense of the seriousness of this issue, the personal risks I have undertaken in researching the issue, and provide context for understanding the scale of the attacks against all of us asking

questions and the pressure on you as a publisher. I believe that retraction of the chapter will be a powerful blow to freedom of expression and legitimate scholarly research and analysis, as well as harming others who have, at considerable personal risk, tried to obtain transparency and accountability at the OPCW.

I look forward to hearing from you in due course,

Regards

Piers

1) Email from senior OPCW official



2) Image from link in endnote viii re Higgins/Bellingcat online conduct.



Endnotes:

ⁱ The material in this chapter is drawn largely from on-going work being conducted by members of the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media (WGSPM) <http://syriapropagandamedia.org>. The author can be contacted at piers.robinson@propagandastudies.org or piers.robinson@me.com.

ⁱⁱ US Department of Defense Information Report, Available at <http://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Pg.-291-Pgs.-287-293-JW-v-DOD-and-State-14-812-DOD-Release-2015-04-10-final-version11.pdf>. Download date 11 December 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a detailed review of these studies see Robinson 2019.

^{iv} It is understood the UK special forces have been involved in the conflict and it has also been the case that the UK joined in with military action after the alleged chemical weapon attack in Douma 2018.

^v Mayday Rescue and variously Chemonics served as the 'implementing organisations' providing 'stipends, training and equipment for SCD [White Helmets], as well as supporting ... overall capability and ...relationships with governance actors and other service providers'. For fuller details see Syria Resilience CSSF Programme Summary, 2017. Draft document available online at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/630409/Syria_Resilience_2017.pdf accessed 6 January 2019.

^v Syria Resilience CSSF Programme Summary, 2017, draft document available online at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/630409/Syria_Resilience_2017.pdf, accessed 6 January 2019.

^{vi} Syria Resilience CSSF Programme Summary, 2017. Draft document available online at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/630409/Syria_Resilience_2017.pdf. Download date 6 January 2019.

^{vii} An interesting example of media reliance upon Bellingcat was recently highlighted when a Newsweek journalist, Tareq Haddad, resigned because his editors had refused his story regarding leaked documents from the OPCW (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons). The editors justified the spiking of his story on the grounds that Bellingcat had debunked the leaks. Haddad himself leaked the emails from his editors and

can be read here: <https://tareqhaddad.com/2019/12/14/lies-newsweek-and-control-of-the-media-narrative-first-hand-account/>, accessed 30 December 2019. Download date 30 December 2019.

^{viii} For example, a long running dispute between Professor Theodore Postol and Eliot Higgins with respect to alleged chemical weapons attacks in Syria led to Postol indicating that the work by Higgins was unscientific and tendentious. See The Centre for Investigative Journalism, <https://tcij.org> and the Postol-Higgins public debate, 20 October 2018. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmKsECGQvoY>. Download date 27 December 2019. See also <https://twitter.com/EliotHiggins/status/1053718779295944706?s=20>. Download date 18 January 2022.

^{ix} For example, one academic has smeared the Working Group as ‘conspiracy theorists and pro-Assad apologists’ whilst another has described members of the working group as ‘sick fuckers’ promoting ‘loony conspiracy theories’ as well as being Islamophobic. The latter academic also attacked UK journalist Neil Clark over Twitter stating ‘Neil Clark hits his head against a sharp object, and shit oozes out’. A database of screenshots of these smears is available upon request from the author. Neil Clark has previously been engaged in legal action against Oliver Kamm of the *Times* newspaper for an alleged campaign aimed at destroying Clark’s reputation. The legal dispute has now ended and an agreed statement can be read on on Neil Clark’s twitter feed: <https://twitter.com/NeilClark66/status/1241047240753516544?s=20>. Accessed 18 January 2022.

^x <https://couragefound.org/2019/10/opcw-panel-statement/>.

^{xi} Dominic Kennedy has been asked by the author repeatedly whether the Times attack had anything to do with the Integrity Initiative but he has repeatedly refused to answer the question; Deborah Haynes has claimed her name was on the article by mistake although there has been no attempt to correct this. Correspondence between these journalists and the author is available.

^{xii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TACfQT3Th3k> Download date 6 January 2020.