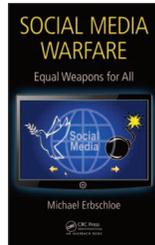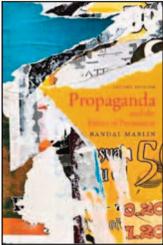# Review Essay

Propaganda in Times of Social Media Warfare

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Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion. 2nd ed. *By Randal Marlin.* Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2013. 392 pp. ISBN 9781554810918.

Social Media Warfare: Equal Weapons for All. *By Michael Erbschloe.* Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2017. 303 pp. ISBN 9781138036024.

As we witness the rise of a culture that lauds conspiracy theorist websites, uncontained hatred, discriminatory speech, and inflammatory fake news, Randal Marlin's 2013 book *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion* and Michael Erbschloe's 2017 study *Social Media Warfare* promise to shed some light upon this fairly dim age of political populism and post-truth discourse. The mechanisms that previously shielded us from demagoguery along with a blind faith in ideologies are no longer enough, since in these times of McLuhan's global village and speed-of-light social networks, the techniques of propagandists have also mutated throughout the Web, marketing, advertising, military disciplines, and even public relations. These books critically engage and attempt to lay bare these mechanisms. Both Marlin and Erbschloe dwell on the hope that people will educate and organize themselves to identify, resist, and detect propaganda. This review essay aims to put these very different books into conversation with each other to glean what their approaches make us think about propaganda and the contemporary tools that support it. Thus, the benefit of this exercise is not only to familiarize the reader with current trends in academic research, but also to contrast two approaches that, although different, intend to inform the reader about a diverse range of dangers surrounding propaganda and social media in their daily lives.

According to Marlin, the "primary objectives of [his] book are to define what is meant by propaganda, to assist in understanding how it works, and to come to grips with ethical problems surrounding its use" (p. 3). Consequently, from Gramsci's ideas regarding hegemony to Foucault's ideas about power and through to Lasswell's manipulative vision of propaganda, the first chapter of *Propaganda and the Ethics of*

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Persuasion offers several positive, negative, and neutral takes on this issue. One of the most interesting questions to confront the reader: Is propaganda always a bad thing? Can propaganda, as a means, justify the end?

Marlin proposes a detailed historiographical revision of the concept of propaganda in light of the events of the current and the past century. A comprehensive analysis of two major propaganda theorists, George Orwell and Jacques Ellul, introduces a discussion about freedom and domination. Through their voices, Marlin emphasizes how propaganda has been used by both left-wing and right-wing politicians to defend and exculpate their partisan interests, wars, revolutions, and, sometimes, the alienation of democratic principles.

The broad scope of Marlin's book allows readers with diverse disciplinary backgrounds to become familiar with different categories and ways of understanding propaganda, including political versus sociological approaches, and the differences between agitation and integration, vertical and horizontal, and irrational and rational forms of propaganda. Marlin offers his own definition for propaganda as follows: "The organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective judgement" (p. 12). What distinguishes his definition is the emphasis he places in the agency of the propagandist, who not only spreads information, but also sets the contextual structures in order to better affect the propagandee's actions.

In the second chapter of *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, Marlin presents historical examples where propaganda has been used as an "attempt to shape the thoughts and feelings of others in ways conforming to the aims of the communicator" (p. 35). These pages present a discussion that spans from ancient Athenians and Romans such as Pericles, Plato, Aristotle, and Augustus to Napoleon and, more recently, to the creation of the government departments in Great Britain and the United States responsible for the coordination and dissemination of propaganda. Inevitably, these pages also study the Nazi regime and its psychological strategy to appeal to the minds of the masses, their feelings, and their fear. He makes an honest historical characterization, where there are no saints or sinners, but a global context in which different political leaders of the nineteenth century used (or abused) their communication strategies for the subjugation of the audience.

Perhaps the greatest contribution in Marlin's clarifying and enlightening book is his description of the techniques use by propagandists. Both scholars and students can benefit from the analysis of the material and symbolic conditions that, mostly presented in the media, tend to create an agenda that exclusively promotes one ideology, religion, or political affiliation. As Marlin puts it, "a large part of the battle to persuade involves, whether people are conscious of this or not, the establishment of the frame within which a given issue is posed" (p. 98). Quoting Dwight Bolinger's (1973) study about the manipulation of language and Eleanor MacLean's (1981) characterization of deceptive practices involving language, Marlin goes on to enumerate several devices involving language manipulation, some of which we can recognize in our recent history, and others we can identify by simply reading the daily newspaper in the morning.

With reference to non-verbal techniques that mislead, Marlin argues that polls, while necessary to enable the layperson to grasp some understanding of complex issues on the public agenda, can be and often are intentionally misleading. Indeed, he argues, "polls can deceive in many ways" (p. 119). Particularly interesting are the examples he uses in this chapter to demonstrate how media publish surveys and polls that relate to their editorial lines, to the detriment of others that may contradict the discourse they are trying to validate. Take, for instance, the well-known example of error through biased (non-random) coverage of the 1936 election by *The Literary Digest* in the United Stated. Using directories of automobile owners and telephone subscribers to create their sample, the magazine mailed a survey to people across the country. With almost two million responses, *The Literary Digest* predicted that Alf Landon would win 370 electoral votes, securing the presidential election and defeating Franklin Delano Roosevelt. However, the sample had been created using a higher proportion of the wealthier population that did not accurately reflect voters, and Roosevelt, who was mostly supported by lower classes, won the election handily.

Subsequent chapters focus mainly on the ethical discussion of propaganda, which Marlin says was one of the subjects he strove to strengthen in this second edition of the book. Without venturing into a single definition of ethics, Marlin reviews the position on the morality of lying in a dialectal way between classics like Kant (1964) and Grotius (1925) and a more contemporary discussion using the works of Bok (1978) and Nyberg (1993). Again, the book offers a detailed description of ways to mislead people without actually lying, such as ignoring, presupposing, or associating someone with negative happenings.

Fully cognizant of the fact that one single chapter cannot contain the entire discussion about ethics and propaganda, Marlin moves on to focus on the ethics of communication, where Habermas' discursive justification is used to present truth as a "warrant assertability" or the idea that "when we enter into a discourse at all times and in any place a consensus can be realized under conditions that identify it as a justified consensus" (p. 167). Needless to say, this is a topic that resonates in current debates inside newsrooms across the world. Marlin warns that "we should pay attention to such things as whether relevant voices are being heard or whether constraints are placed on the speech situation so that only one particular viewpoint gets adequately expressed" (p. 167). This echoes particularly with those studying newsrooms and media studies today; questions about how journalists frame and set their agendas are more relevant than ever in a context where social movements demand diversity and opportunity more than ever before.

The role played by social networks is surprisingly absent in Marlin's *Propaganda*. Although the author attempts to situate the study of propaganda in a more current scenario, he presents a rather positive view of the role played by technology when he claims that "from the standpoint of propaganda, the Internet has already played an important role in challenging the establishment mass media's version of events and their significance" (p. 308). Marlin is pointing toward a democratization in journalism and the audience access as both consumers and producers of news content. Even though this interpretation is not far from reality, and he underscores it with several

examples, the book does not challenge the rise of polarizing political debate in ultra-partisan publications on social networks and in digital forums. Yet such discussion is necessary if, as Marlin states, "people need to be sensitized to these methods [of propaganda] if they are to guard adequately against such manipulation" (p. 2).

Erbschloe approaches the study of propaganda in the digital age with considerably less optimism than Marlin. In the first pages of his book, Erbschloe argues that "evil people in the world [now] have equal access to social media weapons" (p. xi), as much as the readers of this essay have every time they turn their computers or cellphones on. In the 15 chapters of *Social Media Warfare: Equal Weapons for All*, he reviews topics ranging from governments' strategies of using social media to attack, control, and defend against enemies and dissidents to the role played by social media warfare in the political electoral processes. He makes the case that new technologies are allowing the spread of old propagandist techniques directly into the electorate's homes and pockets. This means that the book is concerned with the idea—as should the reader be, according to Erbschloe—that although propaganda and its strategies have maintained stable characteristics over time, the mediums, structures, and platforms through which they can communicate have diversified and massified alongside technological development.

As does Marlin, Erbschloe recognizes the constant tensions between freedom of speech and the efforts made by governments and social media providers around the world to keep propaganda, including terrorist propaganda, at bay; "What is freedom of expression and free speech versus the incitement to terrorism?" (p. 172), he asks the reader. There is no easy answer to this question, and in his book Erbschloe simply presents a brief overview of how different countries in the world are engaging in different strategies to either conquer or completely avoid the *dangers* surrounding social media. Examples include the government in Kazakhstan blocking or slowing dissidents' websites; the presidential ban on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp in Equatorial Guinea; and the new cybercrime laws in Kuwait that ban criticism of Islam. Why is this question so important? Because, as Erbschloe argues, "in many ways, the Internet has made *insurgency* easier to initiate and maintain" (p. 2), and "when governments are involved in a conflict that has a social media warfare component, they will do all they can to control access to social media tools" (p. xix).

The question of government limitations on surveillance is worryingly absent. For example, when discussing the development of social media policies for faculty and staff in school environments, Erbschloe suggests that "employees should think twice about the value of the content and consider whether or not it may potentially malign or polarize any person or group" (p. 255). Let us remember Marlin's warning about this same issue: What kind of constraints are we allowing on our daily routines and how are these constraints affecting the diversity of voices we hope to see expressed in Western democracies? Understanding these constraints and their effects is imperative, because they delimit the frames and spaces in which free citizens are able to move and express their opinions and ideas.

The reader will find less room for questioning whether propaganda may be benign in *Social Media Warfare* than in Marlin's *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion.* As Erbschloe defines them, propaganda techniques include the use of "confusion tactics

[that] are processes designed to disorient and deceive opponents regarding what is real and not real. In many ways, this is a classic propaganda method that is meant to instill fear, uncertainty, and doubt" (p. 61). Such methods have not changed. Rather, they have found new platforms through which they can reach a broader audience.

Erbschloe presents a clear distinction between military applications of social media warfare and civilians and governments waging war using social media tools and technologies. The first application of technology "requires a far higher technical knowledge and skill" (p. xix), he writes, while the latter is easier to learn, and therefore more likely to be used by common people without military training. Both, however, could be equally dangerous. According to Erbschloe, the offensive social media warfare tactics include "deception, confusion, divisiveness, exposure, nullifying opponents, trolling, relationship building, and blended tactics" (p. 58). These tactics should concern the reader as long as they include abrasive intrusions into their public and most private life.

While Marlin's book falls short in discussing current military applications of social media warfare, Erbschloe's is weak in discussing questions of ethics that should be at the core of its considerations. For Erbschloe, new communication technologies have provided laypeople with new tools that he characterizes as a "modern approach to classic propaganda campaigns" (p. 85). What this means is that we are witnessing a democratization in the tools and techniques that hinder democracy itself. These new technological, public, and digital conflicts have taken place beyond mere discourses and debates; they are the *warfare* in the title of his book, having forced governments and intelligence organizations to be trained and prepared to deal with national and international threats that originate in social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Marlin's and Erbschloe's takes on propaganda are complementary. Marlin's *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion* opens the question of how to observe propaganda as a historical process that has been used for different social, political, and cultural objectives by members from all parts of the political spectrum. Erbschloe's *Social Media Warfare* provides a list of critical frameworks that highlight the ongoing modern war happening behind screens. Both books recognize the importance of studying the dynamics, techniques, and possibilities of one of the most powerful tools in modern history: the dangerous ability to persuade. Read together, these books enable readers to see a complex widening panorama as digital technologies develop in our time. They also allow them to tackle the question about propaganda in the twenty-first century from different perspectives; whether it is a moral, ethical, or a pragmatic discussion, readers will be enthralled to start identifying in their own experiences all the different ways in which and places where propaganda already surrounds us.

These books are recommended for those studying propaganda and persuasion in both historical and contemporary contexts. But they are also recommended to those who wonder how the political landscapes are and will be shifting around the world, why polls and experts look perplexed after every electoral process, and why rumours of propagandistic attacks are not only entertaining news, but also a serious concern for the people living in this global village.

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