The Committee on Public Information: A transmedia war propaganda campaign

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Abstract

This article summarises a PhD dissertation of the same name. It develops an understanding of how propaganda entered journalism and popular culture in the United States during World War I through an examination of materials created by the Committee on Public Information (CPI). Three CPI divisions were studied: The Division of News, the Four Minute Men, and the Division of Pictorial Publicity. The methodology of archival contextualisation was created, bringing together the methods of close reading, discourse-historical contextualisation, and Piercian semiotics. A summary of relevant literature is interspersed with thematic historical developments that impacted the relationship between propaganda, journalism and popular culture. This review outlines a gap in knowledge about the archival materials as well as the relationship between propaganda, journalism and popular culture from this period. A discussion about how the expectations of persuasion, truth and amusement relate to each other when mediated in culture, using Lotman’s concept of the semiosphere further develops an understanding of propaganda as a cultural system in relation to other cultural systems – in this case, journalism and popular culture. Findings from the study include that the CPI created a transmedia war propaganda campaign, which enabled propaganda to successfully draw entertainment value from popular culture and credibility from journalism in order to influence public opinion.

Keywords: Committee on Public Information, propaganda, journalism, popular culture

1. Introduction

This article is a summary of the PhD thesis, adapted from the dissertation of the same name: The Committee on Public Information: A transmedia war propaganda campaign. First and foremost, the purpose of the study was to develop an understanding of the way in which
domestic propaganda created by the US Committee on Public Information (CPI) manifested in journalism and popular culture during World War I. Propaganda and journalism are two areas of culture that functionally oppose each other in the American tradition. Propaganda aims to persuade – it urges the reader to consider that it represents the best attitude or correct action in a given situation, which may or may not be from one political perspective. Shortly after World War I, US journalists revolted against propagandistic lies that were viewed as contaminating journalism. Post-war unease about propaganda and its influences eventually led to the “notion of objectivity” in journalism (Lippmann, 1997; Schudson, 1978, 2001). As Schudson (1978) explains, after World War I:

> Journalists, like others, lost faith in verities a democratic market society has taken for granted. Their experience of propaganda during the war and public relations thereafter convinced them that the world they reported was one that interested parties had constructed for them to report. In such as world, naïve empiricism could not last. (16)

It was only after the war that the American tradition of “objectivity” emerged as a “serious professional discussion” in journalism (Schudson, 2001, 160). Objectivity meant journalists would write facts and avoid value judgements, news would be “cool” as opposed to emotional, and it would be non-partisan, without slant (Schudson, 2001, 150). This is distinctly different from other traditions of journalism, such as the German and the British, which do not claim to produce objective reporting.

In Britain, “Rather than objectivity, notions of truth, independence and ‘fair play’ held greater appeal to 20th-century British journalists” (Hampton, 2008, 487), and “as an ideal objectivity did not become predominant within 20th-century British journalism” (489). German journalism “from its beginning … was dominated by a strong belief in the superiority of opinion over news” and in the European tradition, the press held the viewpoint that objectivity in journalism was not possible (Donsbach and Klett, 1993, 56). However, it should be emphasised that this does not mean that German or British journalism did not value truth; rather, truth could also come from a partisan source outlining a specific course of action.

Thus, the US tradition of objective journalism in particular contrasts with the function of propaganda. It cannot be objective, because it aims to persuade the reader to believe in a particular course of action. Relating the functions of propaganda and popular culture leads to a similar clash of values. Popular culture involves free will to choose something as amusement or entertainment purely for the sake of enjoyment. This contrasts with the notion of propaganda because its purpose is rhetorical. Yet during World War I, some propaganda pieces became forms of entertainment. With this in mind, it is curious that pieces of media from a propaganda campaign can become objects of entertainment based on free will.

The study focuses on three of the CPI’s domestic divisions: the Division of News (DoN), the Division of Four Minute Men (FMM) and the Division of Pictorial Publicity (DPP). In examining the files of the CPI, the author focuses on the dynamic use of technologies and cultural systems in the acts of persuading, informing and entertaining. In part, the focus is on the dynamic use of technologies because “public opinion is a changing thing, propaganda is not static and cannot be standardized” (Lutz, 1933, 496). Wartime – particularly total war – is a useful period of time to study propaganda because:
In short, war intensifies awareness of the power of communication for positive and negative outcomes. This fact leads to attempts to control the access of information, harness the power of communication for persuasion, and, at times, to manipulate its power for propagandistic ends. (Haridakis et al., 2009, 4)

Archival materials of the CPI were examined in relation to the research questions of the study, which ask:

- What can archival materials from the CPI tell us about how propaganda enters journalism and popular culture?
- What are the medialogical implications?
- What is the significance of what is found?

The data is derived from materials of a propaganda organisation, but the author is interested in the implications across all three areas of concern and their dynamic movement. The focus is on how archival files demonstrate how one system – propaganda – enters other systems – journalism and popular culture. This study is based in the field of media and communications and is interdisciplinary; the approach is based in media and cultural studies. Next, a short overview of the CPI is provided (section 2), followed by a condensed literature review of some studies that analyse the CPI and some relevant historical contextual information (section 3). Information about the data for the study (section 4) is outlined. Next, the methodology is explained (section 5). And lastly, findings from the study and their significance are recapitulated (section 6).

2. Overview of the Committee on Public Information

As an initiative of the US government, the CPI was the official source of government news during World War I. It acted as a clearing-house for official war information. The CPI coordinated communication between government agencies including the Navy and Army with non-governmental organisations such as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army to propagate war information to the American public. The CPI is a practical example of how “public opinion can be influenced” (Pinkleton, 1994, 239). The CPI was split into two sections: domestic and foreign. It was then further broken down into divisions. The foreign section propagated its messages through materials such as newspapers and motion pictures, on what can be considered an almost worldwide scale, reaching destinations as widespread as Germany, France, Russia, Canada, the Philippines, Italy and Australia, among many others. But it is the domestic battle to win the support of the American people for the war effort through a propaganda campaign that is examined here.

In the Red, White and Blue Series, an educational booklet and propaganda tool published by the CPI for public consumption, President Wilson stated, “it is not an army we must shape and train for war, it is a nation” (Wilson, qtd in CPI, 1917). The CPI needed to propagate through geographic and cultural obstacles with efficiency and efficacy. Its strategy was to reach all Americans, to make them feel the need to “do their bit” through all means necessary, on the local, state and national scale. The domestic section of the CPI included the Division of the Four Minute Men (FMM), the Speaking Division, the Bureau of State Fair Exhibits, the Bureau of War Expositions, the Division of Films, the Division of News (DoN),
the Division of Advertising (DoA), the Division of Pictorial Publicity (DPP), the Bureau of Cartoons, the Division of Syndicated Features, the Division of Civic and Educational Cooperation, the Division of Work with the Foreign Born and the Division of Women’s War Work, among many others.

The domestic campaign reached across the United States and its territories through every media form available, telling different parts of the war narrative. The CPI propagated war through various media, incorporating text, image, moving images, speech and live events. The CPI set the agenda for public discourse by framing daily tasks of everyday citizens as necessary endeavours. Archival files demonstrate how campaigns took place in newspapers and popular periodicals, window storefronts, classrooms, live painting events at libraries, elementary schools and colleges, motion picture theatres, parades and door to door. Tactics include publishing press releases in newspapers and other publications such as trade journals and popular magazines, creating a nationwide speaking group that performed persuasive speeches during intermission at movie theatres, and enabling a visual of the war depicting a pro-war anti-German stance in movie-stylised posters. Volunteers who created and propagated the CPI’s messages consisted of people from all walks of life – historians, artists, celebrities, children, journalists and homemakers. The reach of the campaign was vast and its materials innumerable. The scale, diversity and successful conversion of public opinion from neutrality to popular support for the war make it a worthwhile case study.

3. Pinpointing a gap in knowledge

In order to define an area of knowledge contribution for the study, a literature review of previous analyses of the CPI was performed. An in-depth historical contextual review about the relationship between propaganda, journalism and popular culture was also a key portion of the same chapter as the literature review. A substantially reduced overview is presented here.

Propaganda is often viewed as a negative development because it affected the freedom of the press, its ideas and its expression of them (Hollihan, 1984, 256). It is most often defined in negative terms; however, propaganda is not inherently evil – it is neutral. It can propagate useful and desirable outcomes for a group – for example, in addition to promoting hatred of the enemy, the CPI also propagated awareness campaigns about sexually transmitted diseases and encouraged the donation of clothes to The Salvation Army for those in need. As Harold Lasswell (1928) writes in his study “The Function of the Propagandist”:

[Propaganda is] no more moral or immoral than a pump handle. Whether specialization in the technique can be justified in one’s mind depends upon the conviction that the long-run interest of society in social harmony will be served by expert mobilization of opinion as they have been served by expert litigation. (264)

Context matters because what is propagated and how it is propagated factors into value judgements. Today the word ‘propaganda’ is still burdened with negative connotations compounded by World War I practices of public opinion manipulation – practices that continue today in virtually every country around the globe. Although its past use and connotations are varied, propaganda’s pervasiveness and success as a means to influence
public opinion and guide people’s actions are the reasons why the study of propaganda remains a necessary endeavour. Many studies have analysed the CPI as an American propaganda machine or as the starting point of democracy promotion in US culture. This study draws upon the knowledge collected and disseminated from these and other points of view; but ultimately, new knowledge is generated through an analysis of archival materials and contextual data, focusing on the circulation of meaning in propaganda, journalism and popular culture.

Mock and Larson (1939) found the “lost files of the Creel Committee” and documented much of what is now in the holdings of NARA. Mock and Larson conclude that “whatever degree of civilian control military men would like to see, they know as [CPI director] George Creel did that man does not live by bread alone – that publicity and propaganda must keep alive the fires of patriotism however stern the laws may be” (346). Vaughn (1980) concludes that the CPI was “too ready to suspend freedom” and that it “engaged in a subtle censorship, too, when it filled the country with official news” (234). He identifies the CPI as a turning point in research. Before the war, the government focused its research platform on how to best inform the public and enable them to develop informed opinions, whereas after the war the government researched how to manipulate public opinion (235–6). Blakey (1970) critiques historians who wrote books from the perspective of the US government. He describes how history books were published, regardless of whether or not their contents was evidenced in fact, and concludes that their “propaganda work represented a severe break with scholarly historical standards” (148). Pinkelton (1994) examines the CPI as a contributor to modern-day public relations through summaries about various divisions in relation to contemporary PR theory. Several studies discuss the CPI from a communications perspective, and concentrate on the CPI as the starting point for other organisations that subsequently were built following the work of Sproule (1984), but go into much less detail about the specifics of World War I (Brewer, 2009; Jowett and O’Donnell 2001). A major contribution of Jowett and O’Donnell’s (2001) text is their identification that post-World War I studies often lack examination of the contextual factors of propaganda that help understand why it was effective (221).

An analysis of the CPI during World War I and its impact on freedom of speech is found in Mock’s (1972) Censorship 1917. He describes how the Espionage Act and the Sedition Act were created to censor free speech, cables and telegrams, books and films. Mock explains that the passing of the Sedition Act of 1918 was a major event in American domestic activities because it was the first time in 119 years that the US government had created a “thoroughgoing legal restrictor of [Americans’] constitutional liberties” through the empowerment of “executive, legislative, judicial, civil, and military forces” over and above the Constitution (Mock, 1972, 6). The prohibitive laws had drastic penalties, which were strong deterrents to voicing opposition to the war and/or the government.

The muckraking journalism movement, which was triumphed for making organisations accountable to the public, was in substantial decline by the start of the war. Newspapermen, including muckrakers such as Ernest Poole and Ida Tarbell, worked for the Division of News. Journalists, who had been celebrated for holding the government and robber barons to account for their actions, turned into propagandists and worked (and sometimes volunteered) for the government and its war effort. Muckraking had “made a deep impression on American culture” and its “appearance had coincided with the rise of aggressively marketed popular magazines” such as Collier’s, Atlantic, McClure’s, Everybody’s, Cosmopolitan and
Pearson’s and it spread “the progressive spirit” (Kenney, 1980, 59). These magazines displayed images created by famous illustrators of the time such as Charles Dana Gibson.

Propaganda posters also displayed the work of famous artists. Winter (2009) examines the meaning of British war posters and their visual codes, which “had counterparts on the stage and in song” which the soldiers realised trivialised the war (46). He declares: “Here is the key to the history of popular culture in wartime Britain and among that part of the nation in action on the Continent. A civilian army brought its civilian entertainments with it.” (58, cf. also Fuller, 1990, and Grayzel, 2002). Another form of popular culture at the time was motion picture theatres – “by 1912 it was no longer a novelty; between 1913 and the war it was fast becoming the main staple of mass entertainment” (May, 1992, 335). Studies that examine the role of the propaganda poster and other visuals in relation to popular culture and its impact in relation to journalism have not been found.

The relationship between propaganda and journalism was well researched and analysed in the interwar years, springing from fears about control by and over the press and the development of the notion of objectivity by US journalists. But Sproule (1984) notes that propaganda analysis did not return to its place of importance like the “1930s style” after World War II and the Cold War because academic attention returned to quantitative analysis such as Lasswell’s content analysis, which was more useful to government and other organisations in order to better apply public opinion techniques rather than disseminate or protect against manipulative practices. Sproule (1984) also asserts that patriotic tides accompanying the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War caused propaganda analysis to retreat to the periphery, losing its pre-war status as a major focus for academic and general interest writers (3).

In an article called “Commentary: Communications and the Progressive”, James W. Carey (1989) concludes that there is much work to be done regarding propaganda analysis, because the movement that started the resurgence of the tradition – Herman and Chomsky’s Manufacturing Consent (1988) – is “stuck back about 1936” (281). Carey concludes that this is because there is “little need for yet another unmasking of bourgeois ideology”. Similarly, there is little need of a sludge that combines Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Adorno, and Marx into a language of impotence and intellectual privilege. We might begin the task of reconstruction, taking a suggestion from the early progressives, in the place we live now, amidst generally undemocratic practice and anti-civil habits. (281)

Carey’s call to the progressives relates to the muckraking period, which found its philosophical rationale in progressive thought. Muckraking can be criticised as pushing more for publicity about the problems in society’s structures, rather than actually generating real understanding and motivation for action in its readers. But the ways in which persuasion can tell the truth as well as become a popular movement are contentious.²

Although all forms of propaganda are in some way irrational, most successful propaganda uses facts in order to promote its message (Ellul, 1973, 86). The main distinction is that

² Simply look at the field of Public Relations and its continual battle for society to view it as an ethical profession
Rational propaganda is based on “facts, statistics and economic ideas” (84) and irrational propaganda focuses creating purely emotional responses (86). These distinctions are useful for understanding the basis of what is propagated, and for comparing it to the cultural expectations. This is one way in which journalism and propaganda can be seen as related – both can produce stories based on fact, yet objective journalism should not contain a prejudice for swaying attitudes. The role of agency of the individual must also be acknowledged in examining the relationship between propaganda and journalism popular culture because an audience is just as much an author of a message as the propagandist, journalist or entertainer.

Roland Barthes’ (1997) concept of the “death of the author” (147) demonstrates that an author’s intentions to be removed completely – meaning that signs in a text can signify without a limitation to the original intent. One such example is described in The Best Propaganda: Humphrey Jennings, The Silent Village (1943). Hartley (2007) discusses the tension between war propaganda as an object of dislike and as an object of art appreciation. The content of The Silent Village depicts total war through a story about a village called Lidice in Czechoslovakia. The film is a piece of anti-fascist British propaganda that aims to persuade its audience about the righteousness of going to war against the Nazi’s based on one story about how almost the entire population of the city was massacred. Yet, even though it was most definitely propaganda, it was nominated for an Oscar. There is tension between fighting off the allure of popular propaganda created by governments, or other interested parties attempting to persuade an audience, versus adoring a piece of popular culture regardless of its argument – and even calling it beautiful. Hartley explains that while a text may be viewed as propaganda, it can also be adored as an object of beauty:

Propaganda is hardly “in” popular culture; or if so it’s like a virus – something that infests an environment for its own purposes, which may be harmful to the host organism. And no one, at least those of us drilled in modern Western democratic-process ideologies, is supposed to like propaganda. (144)

Here, beautiful refers to the masterful use of the medium (technology) in the context of cultural taste and imaginative research of the public (popular culture). Hartley (2007) argues that this is what makes it better than (say) Triumph of the Will (1935), which never goes beyond the perspective of the “sender” (150). This is a nuanced approach to understanding how propaganda circulates as popular culture, which a cultural and media studies approach enables. The technologies of mass communication have agency in their own right. However, reducing symbolic communication to the technical processes of any technology is applying faulty logic because a variety of content within messages, carried over many technological platforms, in a variety of contexts, and each of these – content, medium, context – have implications for understanding communication.

In journalism research, propaganda is often attributed to outside influences. One example is Ponder’s examination of the Food Administration during World War I. He concludes:

The legacy of World War I government persuasive campaigns, then, is more complex than simply one of journalistic resistance to government manipulation. Government use of recognizably modern techniques of mass persuasion was not universally condemned but, in the case of the US Food Administration, sometimes regarded as inspirational. When the Food Administration disbanded, many of its volunteers and staff members returned...
to work in advertising, publicity, politics, and news work invigorated by the experience of shaping public opinion in a noble cause. Yet the Food Administration’s work, like the other World War I propaganda campaigns, reflected an aggressive intervention in the public discourse early in the twentieth century and a prelude to increased executive publicity practices in peacetime as well as in wartime. (Ponder, 1995, 545)

Here, Ponder focuses on the Food Administration’s intervention in public discourse rather than journalism’s failure to act as the fourth estate. The role that journalists played in the development and continual use of propaganda in the news, if acknowledged, is generally not the focus of analyses in journalism studies.

A notable exception is Socolow’s (2007) *News as a Weapon*, which is based in critical theory. The concept of the public sphere has contributed to understanding propaganda and its relationship with journalism. Socolow (2007) analyses the relationship between radio propaganda and journalism in the United States during World War II from a historical approach. He concludes: that studies about this phenomenon “surprisingly … omit discussion of the most vital network war programming: news broadcasting” (2007, 111). Even more poignant is the notion that “in the historiography of American mass communications, these two genres – war propaganda and early broadcast journalism – have generally been considered distinct”; Socolow writes in his footnotes that his article illustrates that “chroniclers of broadcast journalism’s war years avoid the term ‘propaganda’ almost unanimously” (c.f. n. 9 in Socolow, 2007, 127–8). Furthermore, he notes that “the credibility lent to such efforts by radio’s “objective” journalists proved an essential, but too often overlooked, component of the overall domestic propaganda efforts.” (Socolow, 2007, 126)

St John (2009) focuses on the CPI and the relationship between journalism and propaganda in and points out that World War I was a “crucible for the eventual rise of two industries: professionalized journalism and domestic institutionalized propaganda” (147). He explains, “this struggle over the commodifying of truth presents lingering concerns about propaganda’s role in news content today” (149). From a public relations perspective, Macnamara (2007) outlines “the fork in the road” in the development of communication theory. He suggests that different areas of study have exited the path of communication research at different points and concludes that journalism focuses on media production and practice. PR also focuses on practice, but it has failed to pay attention to effects and outcomes of the practice. Moloney (2000) examines PR in the United Kingdom using propaganda theory, and concludes that PR is “often undeclared, making it difficult to establish the motives and intent which produce it”, and that journalism plays a part in this because the PR materials are “misleadingly presented to audiences as journalism” (79). This study analyses how institutional messages shift from direct propaganda – that is, directly from the government using its own vehicles for dissemination – into cultural propaganda – that is, propagated through a culturally based meaning-filled medium such as journalism.

According to Hartley (2009a), popular culture is the “true origin” of modern journalism, and “popular culture is the subject (source) of journalism, not its object (destination)” (310). Hartley maintains that journalism is actually a cultural practice. He states that journalism can be analysed from a “cultural approach by proposing that journalism should not be seen as a professional practice at all but as a human right” (39). Hartley’s (2009b) approach draws on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948) definition of journalism. It is
described as an activity that can be performed by “everyone”, with everyone having the right to “impair” “information and ideas” (UDHR 1948, qtd in Hartley, 2009b). This challenges the macro societal approach to journalism because it democratizes a form of communication and provides agency to the individual as a journalist. The democratization of media (e.g. comic books, novels, tv) has led to moral panic in the past and some traditionalists see Hartley’s broad definition of journalism as an encroachment upon a professional domain. This study challenges the dominant perspective of journalism as a professional-only practice because it places emphasis on the movement of information from one domain (system) to another.

Developments such as the muckraking movement; trends in popular culture such as famous illustrators and attending motion theatres for entertainment, propaganda research agendas moving to manipulation, and the development of the notion of objectivity in the American press are all important contextual factors in this study. A media and cultural studies approach, using a historical case study which takes contextual factors into account, provides a way to contribute to scholarship about the relationship between propaganda, journalism and popular culture. This study develops an understanding about how propaganda entered the systems of journalism and popular culture in the United States during World War I through an examination of CPI archival materials.

4. Archival Data

The main sources of primary data for this study are the US-based NARA Archives II, where the majority of files on the CPI are housed, and the Library of Congress (LoC). For this reason, most archival collection was conducted on location in Maryland and Washington, DC as well as online. A digital camera and flatbed scanner were used to capture a large portion of the holdings of the CPI archives at NARA and copies of CPI publications housed in the LoC. Record Group 63 (RG63), the Files of the Committee on Public Information, is one of the oldest holdings at NARA. Data collection included capturing the section holdings for the DoN, FMM, DPP, correspondence files between CPI members (focusing on Creel and division heads) and a few other divisions such as the Speaking Division and the DoA. Further data for this study were collected in online archives such as the New York Times Newspaper Archive, LoC’s Prints and Photographs Division Online Catalogue, and LoC’s Chronicling America Newspaper Archive. The study also draws on government records of the Department of State from the Censorship Board from 1917–19. US newspapers and various examples of popular culture are also included to explicate the primary data.

3 NARA is split into two archival sites: Archives I in Washington, DC and Archives II in Maryland, just outside the Washington border. Most of the CPI files are located in Archives II.

4 Henceforth all CPI are RG63 unless otherwise noted.

5 Record Group 63 is the holdings number for the Files of the Committee on Public Information at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, MD.
5. Methodology

5.1 Method: Close reading

Close reading, also known as “explication du texte” (translated as “explanation of the text”), is a form of textual analysis in which both the “parts and its whole” are “at the center of interest” because “they are thought to be significant carriers of cultural values and insights” (Larsen, 2002, 120). Close reading was used to develop an understanding of how propaganda entered journalism and popular culture during World War I. This was the best method because it enabled a large amount of data to be analysed while focusing only on what was most relevant to what was under examination in this study. Reading the materials provided an overview of what was in the archives. The files were examined to find their relevance to the purpose of the research – to find out how they circulated in culture.

The first division under study was the DoN. Archival files contained press releases, which were the main focus for this division. Releases that were found to mention particular
campaigns a number of times were then searched for in newspaper databases such as The New York Times (NYT), or the LoC’s Chronicling America database. The FMM was the next division to be analysed. The main focus was the two sets of newsletters that were distributed to FMM around the country: the Four Minute Men Bulletins and the Four Minute Men News Bulletins. These newsletters differ from those in the other two divisions of archival files because they were distributed to a specific audience, excluding the general public.

The last division examined was the DPP. Goebel explains how the “preliminary finding poses a methodological challenge to the study of visual images in the era of the Great War. Iconographic evidence examined in isolation can be misleading.” (80). His solution is a method that enables him to understand their “respective cultural settings” through “particular attention to the contexts that connected the visual and linguistic fields” while paying attention to “visual with discursive and performative modes of representations” (80). He specifically draws from Daniel Sherman’s “registers of experience” (80). His use of registers of experience is a Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition. Although this approach is useful for a comparison of the representation of images from country to country, this study is focused on the posters and other visual materials in relation to how they functioned in journalism and popular culture. For this reason, the analysis of images in CPI materials is compared with other non-visual elements, which requires a method to compliment the textual analysis across media forms. Additionally, as this study focuses on propaganda, it requires a method that brings rhetorical elements to the forefront of the analysis, as well as considering overlap with elements of truth-making and entertainment.

Semiotics based on Peircian philosophy fits both of these criteria. A semiotic analysis is useful because it enables rhetorical aspects to be examined (Nöth, 1990, 338). Child (2005) used this approach in a study examining historical Latin American postage stamps as pieces of popular culture. The study was interdisciplinary because it focused on representation, history, politics and popular culture. Child (2005) explains that this method was useful because it enabled an analysis of messages and the impact of the stamps (137). The analysis of imagery of the DPP applies the categories of index, icon and symbol with the understanding that index will focus on cause or association; icon refers to a meaning that is based on resemblance; and symbolic meaning focuses on convention or agreement. Following a close reading of all divisions, patterns of information were identified and put into thematic categories.
5.2 Method: Contextualisation

This section outlines how historical contextual information relevant to understanding the archival materials and their significance was collected. This method draws upon underpinnings of Wodak’s (2001) discourse-historical approach (cf. also Graham, Keenan and Dowd, 2004; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001). Originally applied within the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA), the basis for contextualisation in this approach is used to complement close reading of archival materials and, for visual items, to complement the application of a Peircian semiotic analysis.

The framework for contextualisation is derived from Wodak’s (1999) approach of incorporating “the historical dimension of discursive acts” by “intra[ting] historical background and the original sources in which discursive ‘events’ are embedded” (188). It
therefore ensures that “historical context is always analysed and integrated into the interpretation of discourses and texts” (Wodak, 2001, 70).

This section describes the method of close reading and semiotics and contextualisation which enabled analyses of archival materials. As such, these methods created a methodology called archival contextualisation. Archival contextualisation incorporates circumstances of a given text. In this study, context is incorporated through the consideration of historical context, media factors and content. This organises the contextual, technological and content-driven factors. The point of intersection “X” is where the considerations join (See Image 4). Context is defined as the external factors that surround medium and content such as the considerations of the time period. Medium refers to the technology by which meaning is moved from one place to another, for example through a website or poster. Content is what is “in” a text and includes all of its textual, visual and auditory features. Context, medium and content provide tangible areas of focus. These considerations facilitate the interpretation of texts with an understanding of the setting in which they sit, the constraints and autonomy of a media form and a better understanding of what the text “says”. The case study chapters of the thesis were organised around these categories, which enabled the context of the division to be discussed first. The media that was used and its cultural significance was analysed (e.g. implications of propaganda orators in cinemas) and then the content of the archival materials was analysed using close reading and was organised using thematic grouping.

6. Findings

6.1 Findings and the Semiosphere

The CPI persuaded America to support the country’s entrance into World War I by propagating war aims such as food and war supply conservation, labour, recruitment and funding, most often through appeals to patriotism and generating hatred of the enemy. A close reading of the archives – of both propaganda itself and correspondence about the propaganda – paying attention to journalism and popular culture, has led to an understanding that these three areas had a significant exchange of content and media forms. Given these findings, an organisation tool was needed to conceptualise the way in which the three cases that have been understood as performing in the systems of propaganda (persuasion), journalism (information) and popular culture (entertainment). Like Goebel (2009), this is the first set of findings, which in and of itself cannot be understood fully without further analysis.

Juri Lotman’s (1979) concept of the semiosphere is based on Soviet scientist Vladimir Vernadsky’s concept of the biosphere (1926). The concept describes how different elements of nature have specific functional purposes. The gases in the atmosphere absorb the warmth of the sun, soak up water from the hydrosphere and then redistribute in the form of rain on the lithosphere. The soil absorbs water. Plants grow and the cycles continue. In this way, it can be seen that each area of the biosphere has a specific functional purpose, but at the same time each is interrelated and none would not be able to perform its tasks without the others.
Originally from earth science, the concept of the semiosphere enables a systems analysis to be applied to culture. It provides a conceptual construct that distinguishes functions of a semiosphere and also demonstrates its interrelation with other semiospheres. The semiosphere refers to “the smallest functioning mechanism … not the separate language but the whole semiotic space of the culture in question” and is “the result and the condition for the development of culture” (Lotman, 1979, 124). The concept of semiosphere is useful because it is a method of understanding and structuring what is in a semiotic space. The concept “allows semiotics of culture to reach a new understanding of holism, a holistic analysis of dynamic processes” (Torop, 2005, 169), which is what the application of this conceptual lens is used to understand further.

This theory takes into consideration that technology functions through dynamic relationships that rely on shared meaning and at the same time involve multiple interpretations during transmission, which also leads to the creation of new information within a cultural context (Lotman, 1990, 13–15).

Applying this thinking, propaganda and popular culture also have their own semiospheres (see Image 5). To put this theoretical model into practice, the semiosphere is used to scope an ‘area’ of culture. Propaganda, journalism and popular culture from the archival data are analysed, each as being its own semiosphere and also within an over-arching semiosphere of culture. This analysis situates propaganda, journalism and popular culture as interrelated systems in the semiosphere like the atmosphere, hydrosphere and lithosphere are situated as within the biosphere. The concept of the semiosphere enables propaganda, journalism and popular culture to be held in theoretical tension as acts of persuading, informing and entertaining. This tension allows reflection on the archival materials as a case study that utilises all three areas of concern to flesh out the answers to the research questions about how propaganda circulates amongst journalism and popular culture.

6.2 Interpreting Findings

In order to persuade, propaganda had to become entertaining as well as factual. The CPI used propaganda to target people’s emotions, to incite peer pressure, patriotism and hatred of the enemy. Popular culture was used as a means to propagate these desired outcomes, for example by encouraging the wearing of pushpins and official civic uniforms.
Fundraising campaigns, such as the highly successful Liberty Loans campaigns, succeeded in commodifying patriotism. When propaganda entered the semiosphere of journalism and popular culture in the campaign entitled “Where Did You Get Your Facts?” the campaign gave further credibility to propaganda by casting suspicion over anything anti-government. The lack of an immediate “on-demand” medium such led to the utilisation of FMM, who gave speeches around the nation at movie theatres, bringing together entertainment, rhetoric and truth-telling.

The principles of journalism involve truth-seeking. But censorship, control over the press, the necessity of performing war activities to win the war and an overwhelming amount of well-organised and broad government publications are major contextual factors in understanding the boundary-crossing between the semiospheres of journalism and propaganda. Medialogically, the way in which newspapers were used to reach and target specific audiences blurred the lines between propaganda and journalism. In the analysis of content, both the DoN, through press releases, and the FMM, through localised publications, functioned in the semiosphere of journalism. Journalism and propaganda both require constant publishing in order to perform their functions. Because the DoN was part of a propaganda organisation, there was an interesting interplay between the aims of propaganda and the aims of journalism, which were combined in the purposes of this Division. Hartley (1996) explains that the “cultural function of journalism is to interrogate difference, to conduct a dialogue with whatever anomalies, deviances, up and downs it discovers in the semiosphere” (107). When a form of rhetoric is “put” into journalism, a form of truth-seeking – say, through an editorial or the placement of a story – the function of journalism and its
place in the semiosphere change. The semiosphere of journalism develops asymmetry and because propaganda may not be translated from the ‘language’ of its own semiosphere into the new one, the validity of propaganda changes too, as it is now viewed within an activity of truth-telling.

Journalism gave credibility to propaganda. Muckrakers, experienced in developing public awareness, helped the government to spread its messages. Muckrakers encouraged the public to put individual needs second to their country’s, claiming that this would strengthen democracy and everyone’s needs would be looked after. This developed a culture with a group mentality of doing what the government asked in name of patriotism. Journalism maintained propaganda messages as a daily encounter and a concern on the minds of the people. Journalism, idealised as objective and factually based, is a human practice founded on other human practices. The role of news changed when the government puts rhetoric into it. When propaganda performs at the cultural level “in” the press, it is inside a targeted and trusted medium that functions differently from the expectation of seeking truth.

Image 7 “Beat Back the HUN” poster (CPI, 1917, from the LoC)
Here ‘the hun’ is depicted as bloodied and peering over the edges of Europe, looking to bring the war to the US, though this was an extremely unlikely event at this time.

Propaganda is inherently biased in both policy and agenda. It attempts to influence, persuade and encourage action that will support the propagandist. Successful propaganda relies on the acceptance of it by a mass group. For this reason, mass communication is utilised to disseminate factual and emotional information (as well as outright lies, as was the case with some atrocity stories) and at all times blending these together to achieve a strong emotional connection between the masses to the propagandist’s agenda. Posters – especially those that focused on hate (see Image 7 and its depiction of The Hun) – played a role in the transition of lies to common belief. During World War I, and often in the present day, journalists rely on government information to write articles and publishers rely on press releases. Reliance on
materials that were not fact checked (or simply could not be confirmed) lead to faulty information being disseminated to the public. The same can be said of popular culture. Entertainment does not require a basis in “fact”; it relies on its broad appeal and, of course, entertainment value. This system further enabled biased and inaccurate information to be spread.

The CPI used popular culture as a means to develop a culture in which individuals who believed that what the government was asking them to do (war work, enlist, conserve food) was necessary to win the war. Citizens could check these visual cues and compare them to expectations of patriotism (a key theme of propaganda materials) – and, if unmet, exert peer pressure. Women were targets of direct popular culture initiatives. At a time when American women could not join the Army or Navy, or even vote, and it was not the norm for women to work outside the home, there were fewer options for women to assert themselves. But fashion was an outlet where women were able to define themselves publicly. The CPI used this to its advantage. FMM bulletins contained suggestions for how to appeal specifically to women. During Food Conservation Week, one of the ways the CPI motivated the cooperation of women was to offer an “official uniform restricted to women who sign the pledge”, who would be able to purchase the design for ten cents and “procure them from the pattern department of a women’s magazine” (CPI, B10, 1917, 2). The average citizen propagated war because of the CPI’s utilisation of each person’s particular role in society. The success of the CPI’s persuasion relied heavily on popular culture, which was used as a common bond between citizens to encourage a group dynamic.

Image 8 “Teamwork Builds Ships” poster (CPI, 1918, from the LoC)
Winter (2009) argues that, since British soldiers voluntarily joined the war in 1914 and pacifists were basically ignored, “posters and other wartime images are windows into this world of thinking about war: they are signs of solidarity, not carriers of compulsion” (43). However, this reduces the poster’s function to a representation of popular consent and ignores its role as a means of cultural persuasion, as it is employed with a variety of persuasive media. He calls the posters “advertisements of continuity” (47) and maintains that the film industry was the “most important vehicle for projecting the meaning of the war as a struggle of Good against Evil” (49). Although this is a comparison of the British experience and this study focuses on the American, as an image contains aspects of untranslatability to the textual form, meanings are shared and unshared between their rhetoric, but the existence of each confirms the messages in the other. That is, they fashion perceptions of each other as in a process of mediation. The authenticity of the visual form is confirmed in this case by the muckraking journalist’s credibility, gained from investigations in big business. Popular culture also provides entertainment value in war activities by depicting the positive aspects associated with a particular action, such as the attraction women were encouraged to have of men who build ships (see Image 8).

6.3 Transmedia as a Filter of Boundary

Transmedia is the production and distribution of specific parts of a narrative in different media forms to heighten a users experience (Jenkins, 2006). Transmedia is not only a feature of the digital age, but was fully operational in the era of the CPI (Benson, 2010). The use of transmedia in the CPI’s campaign is evidenced in the varying media through which different messages were conveyed to the FMM through bulletins and news bulletins and to the public through their speeches and publicity. The FMM speeches were advertised in their local newspapers, had accompanying information in other forms of media such as dress patterns in magazines, incorporated singing into speeches and provided means for audiences to obtain additional literature at a small cost. Once the Division of Films became successful, the usefulness of the motion picture as a medium became obvious. Not only were the motion pictures themselves useful to show information in narrative form, and the patrons a great audience, but the advertising for motion pictures also provided another entry point for publicity. The FMM were representatives of the government who gave speeches but were also told to work with newspapers in their communities in a number of ways. In the column where movies were advertised, the name of the Four Minute Man, sometimes along with the topic of their speech, was also printed. A page dated 7 April 1918 of the New York Tribune advertises upcoming movies and the FMM. The advertisement reads:

By special appointment from Joseph B. Thomas, of the Committee on Public Information at Washington, Arnold Daly will appear as a “Four-Minute Man” during to-night’s performance and will address the audience on the third Liberty Loan. (Garden and Underhill, 1918, 7)

In addition to a listing in the motion picture section, the bulletins were summarised and sent to local FMM chairman and publicity managers in “thousands of communities for use in the local papers” (CPI Report, 1920, 29). Based on information from a news clipping service focusing “only on the larger newspapers of the country”, Creel estimates that 873 articles per month made it into the larger newspapers (29). It is also of note that the influenza epidemic of 1918, which killed an estimated 50 million people abroad and in the United States, increased reliance on non-public methods of propagating information about the war. Because of the epidemic, Creel explains in a report “in all parts of the country [newspapers] devoted sufficient space to carry daily four-minute messages prepared for them by members of the organization” (CPI Report, 1920, 29).

Bulletin 16, dated 24 September 1917, gives permission “[f]or reference use with permission to reprint or quote”, which encourages the sharing of the information in the FMM Bulletin (CPI, B:16, 1917, 1). Bulletin 10 introduces Food Conservation Week. FMM were used as content scanners for local newspapers, and were asked to “please make it your duty to inform [your local papers] fully concerning our plans for the week and make certain that you are given the ‘Four Minute Men’ care” (CPI, B:10, 1917,1). In addition to pointing towards material and providing slogans and speeches, the Committee also encouraged FMM to send in their ideas to make the Four Minute Men “the mightiest force for arousing patriotism in the United States” (CPI, B:1, 1917, 1).

In a supplementary bulletin to the second Liberty Loan of 1917, speakers were given materials sent in by people around the country. Selections were made and printed in the bulletin. One suggestion was to get help from store advertisements by soliciting “every retail
distributor in [the] United States to devote space to Liberty Loan in all their newspaper advertising” (CPI, B:17 Supplement, 1917, 3). The FMM were also “urged to advise of special conditions requiring attention in their districts, mailing lists of names to whom literature should be sent” (CPI Report, 1920, 20).

Through the Registration Day campaign, the practice of recruiting soldiers at cinemas began in World War I and continues as a recruitment method for the US Department of Defense nearly a century later. The modern form is advertising during previews. Vaughn’s suggestions – that the ready-made audience, voluntary local speakers and tight control by headquarters significantly contributed to the CPI’s success – are accurate. However, in addition, the speeches were extraordinarily successful because of the publicity given to them by newspapers, chairmen writing articles for newspapers and newspapers writing articles based on these. The success was also because headquarters instructed FMM to create local-centric speeches, speeches were integrated into intermissions and the speeches were often considered entertainment in themselves. Cinema audience attendance grew with publicity of FMM speakers in newspapers. The CPI strategy of putting complex ideas into simple structured arguments and tapping into existing communities was effective. The listing of speakers in newspapers gave further credibility to the FMM orators and their speeches.

The transmedia propaganda campaign is also evidenced in a section called “No Profound Study Necessary”, written by FMM director McCormick Blair. He writes:

> Our hearers, of course, must be told that no profound study is required; merely care in reading – close, attentive reading – instead of a hasty glance between bites at breakfast. Urge a re-reading of the President’s messages. As the public to read in full every official statement as it appears in the daily papers. Invite listeners to leave their names and addresses so as to secure through you, if you will, or through the local Four Minute chairman, the pamphlets published and given free by the CPI. They give in plain language accurate, authoritative facts. (CPI, B:20, 1917, 6)

The FMM continually encourages its audiences to choose sides and read the literature. Bulletin 20 lists publicly available CPI publications and encourages orators to relay them to their audiences. These include the National Service Handbook, the Official Bulletin and a variety of articles, pamphlets and books, which the CPI sold as well as gave out freely. A suggested speech within the bulletin asks:

> Are you with us, for us? Will you help the Four Minute Men? Then reread the President’s messages, and a few documents in plain language, no long study, just plain outstanding facts. You can get the pamphlets free through me, by giving me your name and address tonight after this talk. (CPI, B:20-B, 1917, 8)

Four Minute Singing was proposed for the fourth Liberty Loan explaining,

> Here is a great opportunity to extend the scope and influences of our work. Community singing already played a great part in many patriotic gatherings; it is our function to extend the same pleasure and privilege to the audiences of our own exclusive field, the motion-picture theaters” (CPI, B:38, 1918, 1)
The speaking took precedence over singing, and the FMM were told that “singing should never be substituted for speaking”, and that it was “in addition to the regular number of Four Minute speeches in each place, and not on the same night” (CPI, B:38, 1918, 2).

In terms of the medialogical overlapping of the semiospheres, many divisions of the CPI, beyond just the three examined here, contributed to the transmedia campaign. Regardless of rhetoric that attempts to disassociate the practices, all three areas of culture actually overlap significantly in the semiosphere (see Image 10).

![Image 10 Describing the dynamic relationship of semiospheres](image)

7. Conclusion

This paper began by setting out a rationale for studying the CPI as a case study to further understand the relationship between propaganda, journalism and popular culture. The end result was a systems semiotic analysis from data selected through an archival contextualisation approach, which enabled a rationale for understanding the paradox of separated areas of culture functioning in isolation. Transmedia was found to be a filter between borders of the semiospheres that enabled the translation of some elements and also untranslated semiospheric functions (i.e. as a reader, what it is to not know propaganda is in journalism). Its determined that credibility derived from publishing propaganda in the semiosphere of journalism was found to have strong consequences for the expectations of journalism. The nature of the relationship discovered in the semiosphere is a dynamic model, which breaks from hegemonic constructs about the relationship of propaganda to society being focused solely on top-down power struggles. Truth is not confined to journalism, and a theory that incorporates journalism and other “spaces” for understanding the circulation of persuasive content is needed – especially one that performs inside and outside the field of public relations, which continues to be dogged by claims of unethical practice.
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