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### **Propaganda and sound**

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## 9

# PROPAGANDA AND SOUND

*David Goodman*

This article is about propaganda that is heard rather than seen. It canvasses some work done on sound propaganda before the 20th century, but focusses on the decades after the development of radio broadcasting in the late 1920s, the period of greatest concern about sound propaganda. Harold Laswell emphasised in an influential 1934 encyclopaedia entry that propaganda could take “spoken, written, pictorial or musical form” (Laswell, 1934: 521). While that had always been the case, and there has always been belief about the importance of aural persuasion, in the era of mass media the *different* trajectories, capacities and receptions of visual and aural propaganda became subjects for more frequent reflection. Concern about the social and political consequences of vulnerability to sound propaganda arguably peaked in the mid-20th century, when “totalitarian” regimes were offering practical demonstrations of what monopoly, or attempted monopoly, of aural propaganda could achieve.

Most definitions of propaganda begin with the origins of the word when the Roman Catholic Church founded the Congregation of the Propaganda in 1622, a committee of cardinals responsible for foreign missions. But since the 19th century, the word propaganda has also and more commonly been used to describe deliberate propagation of information to change opinion on an issue, particularly through the use of mass media. Armed with this concept, historians have then retrospectively discerned and named propaganda activities in earlier centuries. Most definitions of propaganda describe not just attempts to change beliefs and attitudes, sometimes through the evocation of emotion or the use of false or misleading information, but more specifically attempts to create carefully planned and sustained opinion change. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines propaganda as “the systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view.” Some modern definitions of propaganda describe it as quintessentially a state activity, but propaganda has also very often been used for other purposes, including those of religion and commerce.

How systematic and calibrated could a campaign of aural persuasion be? The more emphasis was placed on planned campaigns of aural propaganda, the more concern was generated about the possibly weakest link in this chain of communication – the listener. What if listeners tuned out, failed to concentrate or understand? Repetition became one hallmark of systematic intent, aiming to reinforce messages and maximize chances of reaching most of the population. Attempts to manipulate by suggestion were another hallmark of planned and systematic aural propaganda – important enough that American psychologists Hadley Cantril and Gordon

Allport in 1935 defined radio propaganda as “the systematic attempt to develop through the use of suggestion certain of the listener’s attitudes and beliefs in such a way that some special interest is favored” (Cantril and Allport, 1935: 48).

The belief that sound propaganda is more effective than visual propaganda has a long history. Visual propaganda has often been reliant on written content, which limited its reception. In non-literate societies, music, poetry, and oral stories spread ideas and could change or reinforce attitudes. Journalist Will Irwin argued in 1936 that consequently hearing still had communicative and affective advantages over the relatively recent invention of reading: “all these ages, that faculty of hearing has been gathering about itself an emotional aura” (Irwin, 1936: 247–248). Adolph Hitler no doubt agreed – he told an interviewer that “the sound is in my opinion much more suggestive than the image” (quoted in Schönherr, 1998: 329).

Proponents of the view that sound propaganda may be more potent than visual point out that visual and especially print media were often in the modern era consumed alone and in isolation – silent, solitary reading spread with the rise of book ownership from the early 18th century; although social media today are interactive, much of the consumption of their texts and images is also solitary and silent (Jajdelska, 2007: 192). Sound has in contrast historically more often been heard in a collectivity of some kind – in a church, at a political rally, in conversation. Lacey, recovering a tradition of public listening, recalls early hopes that radio might become “the natural instrument of collectivist politics and experience” (Lacey, 2013a: 101). Informal familial, group, communal, and public listening to radio were all more common in times and places when receivers were scarce. Strikingly, both those who sought to immunize the population against aural propaganda and those who sought to maximize its effectiveness turned to the same social form: collective listening (Goodman 2016a and 2016b). Organized group listening, in both liberal democratic and totalitarian regimes, became a favored means of monitoring the reception of broadcasts to ensure desired outcomes – civilly expressed diversity of views on the one hand, enthusiastic conformity on the other.

Can there be sound propaganda without words? The bells of Christian churches or the Muslim call to prayer have at various times been regarded as aural propaganda for their faiths. Wordless music in specific circumstances function as propaganda. The opening of Beethoven’s 5th symphony was used in World War II as V for victory (the three short and one long notes sounding out the Morse code for V). Jazz’s black origins and mixed race practice gave it propaganda potential. Jazz featured in propaganda broadcasts by both sides during World War II. The US used jazz as an instrument of propaganda for the “free world”; from the mid-1950s the State Department sent top jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, and Benny Goodman to eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East as part of a “self-conscious campaign against worldwide criticism of U.S. racism.” In this case there was also something about jazz’s improvisational form that could be said to embody “a unique American freedom transcending race” (von Eschen, 2004: 4, 20).

More commonly, however, the label propaganda is reserved for sound or music with some verbal content. Music historians have effectively made the case for thinking of early modern religious music as a form of propaganda. Oettinger describes the role of *Music as Propaganda in the German Reformation*, arguing that in this period it was ultimately impossible to separate sacred songs from those dealing with church politics, which was “the driving force behind hymn composition in the 16th century, and it is difficult to draw the line between political songs that are religious and religious songs that are also political.” The hymns of the early Reformation, she argues, were overtly propagandistic – although as regions became increasingly confessionalised “there was less need for musical attacks on other believers” (Oettinger, 2001: 2, 9). Luther believed that music was “an important instrument to ‘incite people to do good, and to teach

them” (quoted in Loewe, 2013: 70). He set hymns to popular tunes, believing, Pettegree summarizes, that in order “to communicate the word effectively there had to be an assimilation of sacred music to the tunes people actually knew” (Pettegree, 2005: 44). Loewe also observes that “singing the Reformation message to popular tunes was a powerful and effective means of disseminating Luther’s views” (Loewe, 2013: 73). In Protestant schools in the early Reformation period, educators were “often musicians who had been recruited according to Luther’s own stated preference for musically able candidates” (Loewe, 2013: 81). Fisher demonstrates that, in Bavaria, music was also an important part of the propaganda for the Counter-Reformation (Fisher, 2014). In the 18th century, the Wesley brothers created Methodist hymns that adapted well-known tunes; several historians of Methodism have observed that the hymns were the most effective form of Methodist propaganda.

The Christian hymn functioned as propaganda in the missionary context, in both Catholic and Protestant traditions. Juan de Zumárragam, the first Franciscan bishop of Mexico City from 1528–1548, was keenly aware of the propaganda power of music. In a letter in April, 1540, he wrote that “Indians are great lovers of music, and the religious who hear their confessions tell us that they are converted more by music than by preaching, and we can see they come from distant regions to hear it” (quoted in Harrison, 2013: 33). In the 17th century too, music was “a seminal part of evangelistic endeavors” for Catholic missionaries in Asia (Irving, 2009: 41). Missionary hymns could however also be turned into anti-colonial counter propaganda. In Kenya in the early 1950s for example, the Mau Mau movement created subversive rewritings of Christian hymns set to well-known hymn tunes, songs one scholar has described as “the most powerful propaganda weapons of the whole Mau Mau movement” (Leakey, 2004: 75).

Other examples could be adumbrated. Some scholars identify folk song, protest, and political songs as propaganda. The case is probably stronger for national anthems, adopted by most European nations in the 19th century (Bohlman, 2004: 155). Sound studies scholars have also speculated about the existence of national soundscapes, elements of which have propaganda potential (Kun, 2014). A strong case has thus been made by many scholars for considering these various explicitly or implicitly polemical musical forms, as propaganda.

### Sound propaganda in the broadcasting era

The advent of broadcasting from the later 1920s – and in particular commercial broadcasting – greatly increased attention to the question of propaganda and sound. Commercial advertising on radio in many nations, but especially in the US, provided an incentive and the funds to research mechanisms and techniques of aural persuasion and propaganda that might have more general application. Edward Bernays, who saw earlier than most the parallels between commercial, political, and religious propaganda, wrote in 1928 that “modern propaganda is a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group” (Bernays, 1928: 52). Cantril and Allport acknowledged the parallels but also contrasted the generally “subtle, indirect, concealed” nature of political, economic, and religious propaganda with the usually “frank and revealed” nature of commercial propaganda (Cantril and Allport, 1935: 60).

After the advent of broadcasting, the advertising industry needed to know more about the relative efficacy of visual and aural advertising. At first there was concern that sound advertising might work less well than print advertising. Sound after all made only a transient impression on the listener; if missed or heard imperfectly, the message was gone. Advertisers consoled themselves by comparing a radio advertisement to a billboard, perhaps only glimpsed in passing, and yet known to be an effective mode of advertising (Meyers, 2013: 73–74). Before long,

however, with the aid of psychological and sociological research, there was new enthusiasm for heard propaganda and its effectiveness, and radio advertising flourished. Frank Elliott noted that studies of recall before 1932 generally found visual stimulus to be more effective, but after that date more studies found that auditory was superior. It was possible, he speculated, that “the enormous increase of auditory stimulus from radio sets for 78,000,000 Americans listening three to five hours per day, from public address systems everywhere, and from sound films claiming 88,000,000 attendances weekly is developing auditory habits” (Elliott, 1937: 86). Radio, American advertising expert Herman Hettinger asserted, possessed “all the emotional appeal and persuasiveness of the voice,” giving it a “power which cold print cannot equal” (Hettinger, 1935: 3). John J. Karol of CBS reported in 1936 that recent research had established “the superiority of the auditory mode of presenting advertising copy as measured in terms of immediate and delayed recall and recognition” (Karol, 1936: 150). One study in 1949 posited enthusiastically that, because of radio advertising’s embeddedness in entertainment programming, “radio appeals are developed against a background of emotional excitement, and radio success may be largely due to the fact a considerable portion of the listeners ‘do what they are told’” (Cassady and Williams, 1949: 77).

While such claims were no doubt welcomed by advertisers, it was not surprising that with such belief in the efficacy of broadcast propaganda, concern about the political and social consequences of this new persuasive capacity grew significantly in the 1930s. A chorus of commentators now worried that radio might create conformity, homogenize, and standardize opinion (Goodman, 2011: 84–90). Charles Siepmann, who had worked at the BBC for twelve years and then relocated to the United States, argued in 1942 that radio “exerts over many listeners an almost hypnotic influence, so that for them the borderline between fact and fancy becomes obscured” (Siepmann, 1942: 7). Educator Clyde Miller affirmed conventional wisdom when he wrote in 1941 that “of all the channels through which propaganda flows, radio is the most effective in preventing or in accelerating social change.” Miller, who was closely associated with the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in New York, was one of many contemporaries who regarded Hitler as a “genius” at broadcast propaganda (Miller, 1941: 69). The political consequences of such belief in the high efficacy of aural propaganda were little short of terrifying. Slightly more optimistically, the proliferation of aural propagandas might – other critics speculated – cancel each other out, creating mere confusion rather than conformity. Educator Keith Tyler wrote in 1939 that the combination of political propaganda and advertising on the air had created a “chaotic warfare of propagandas and counter-propagandas” amidst which “the listener is apt to find himself totally bewildered” (Tyler, 1939: 348). Research on sound and commercial advertising propaganda diminished somewhat in the television era, as radio’s share of the advertising dollar fell.

As noted above, effective transmission of propaganda requires attentive hearers as well as a carefully crafted message. The attentiveness of listeners can be monitored in face-to-face settings, but with the invention of technological means of listening at a distance, listener attentiveness became a matter of some anxiety. Those concerned to protect populations from aural propaganda worried about the many distracted listeners to always-on radios – archetypically the busy housewife at home catching snatches of broadcasts in between chores and caring for children, but actually including a wide range of radio listeners who kept their radios playing as they engaged in other tasks and sociable activities. The specific fear was that the distracted listener was far more likely than the attentive one to become a propaganda victim (Goodman, 2010). Cantril and Allport also warned that children were especially vulnerable to propaganda, citing concerns about children and advertising (Cantril and Allport, 1935: 63).

Propaganda works better if there is a monopoly of message provision. Broadcasting is by its nature generally open and public. Unless something intervenes, listeners have a choice of

stations. Distribution of sound propaganda through wired as opposed to wireless transmission was one way to limit listener choice. Wired radio had the obvious advantage of being centrally controlled, with no possibility of picking up outside stations by accident or design and it was thus perfectly suited as a propaganda outlet. In 1952 US Senator Henry M. Jackson called wired radio an “Orwellian device” – “no one has yet figured out a counter to this move,” he lamented, “which, if carried to its extreme, might take a whole nation off the international air” (Cong. Rec., 1952: A538–539). Wired radio was also in some circumstances cheaper – Lovell argues that it was in the Soviet Union in the later 1920s “the only realistic way of turning radio into a ‘mass’ phenomenon” (Lovell, 2015: 34). From 1925, a wired radio network was put in place in Soviet cities, beginning with Moscow (Lovell, 2015: 33). By the beginning of World War II, 80% of the seven million listening devices in the Soviet Union were wired rather than wireless (Lovell, 2015: 36). The *New York Times* reported in 2001 on the survival of the wired radio network into the post-Soviet era: “By law, wired radio reaches virtually every building in every city, village and farm in Russia, not to mention much of the former Soviet Union” (Wines, 2001: 4). Postwar Poland had a wired radio system based on the Soviet model, as “an instrument of Communist Party propaganda and agitation on a local level” (Sorensen and Meyer, 1955: 343). Communist China developed an extensive wired radio network, reaching up to 90% of the agricultural cooperatives in some areas.

Wired radio could be used in private homes, but often had a significant public role. Loudspeakers in workplaces and public places enabled direct and uninterfered-with transmission of propaganda messages to the population. An American sociologist studying propaganda reported in 1932 that he had to change rooms in his Leningrad hotel because the first room faced the open square “where a loud speaker functioned from six in the morning until eleven at night. Occasionally a song or dialogue was transmitted. For the most part it was a continuous flow of oratory” (Woolston, 1932: 36). An Indian visitor in 1959 described the soundscape created in China by the “ubiquitous wired radio loudspeaker”: “The radio blares away at you in the bus, in the train, in the trolley, in sleepers and dining cars, on street corners, in villages, towns and cities – just about everywhere,” playing “news of the nation’s progress, industrial output, how to make a smelter, how to defeat the American ‘imperialists,’ how to be a good Communist, how to be neat, how to denounce the rightists and a thousand other things, interspersed with Chinese opera and marching songs” (Chandrasekhar, 1959: 9). North Korea has had a wired radio network since the 1940s, also connected to loudspeakers in public places. A.N. Lankov recalls: “When I think about my life in North Korea in the 1980s, I still vividly remember this ever-present background sound – the unremitting military marches, occasionally interrupted by news broadcasts” (Lankov, 2007: 53). In Vietnam, wired radio (used mainly for propaganda) has played an important role – a nationwide network of 900,000 loudspeakers survives from the years of early revolutionary struggle (Mares, 2013: 239).

It was Germany’s National Socialist regime however that most emblematically embraced and deployed sound propaganda as a tool of governing. Mention of Nazi leaders Hitler and Goebbels became almost self-evident proof of the terrible power of sound propaganda in the wrong hands (Zimmerman, 2006: 433). Kris and Speier’s perceptive 1944 study observed that the Nazis had a “preference for the spoken rather than the written word”; radio was their preferred medium for propaganda (Kris and Speier, 1944: 12). Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels described radio as “the most important and far-reaching instrument for leading the people” (Kris and Speier, 1944: 51; Bressler, 2009: 197–210).

To achieve the desired effects, the messages had to be heard by most of the population. The famous *Völksempfänger* radio receiver was produced for the home – cheap to purchase but with poor reception range to limit listening to German stations (tuning in foreign stations was illegal)

– and the *Deutsche Arbeitsfrontempfänger* was installed in factories and other workplaces, where a siren could bring work to a halt in order to allow workers to listen to special broadcasts (Lacey, 1996: 102–103; Bressler, 2009: 197–210). Group listening was favored, so that not only could “experts plan what is said and how it is said ... but they can even, to some extent, supervise listening. As a rule, everyone reads for himself, but listening can be done collectively” (Kris and Speier, 1944: 51–52). With this reach into the population and attempted supervision of reception, and the highly centralized regime of broadcasting in the Nazi era, a powerful instrument of sound propaganda had been forged. Lacey concludes that “only radio offered the possibility of affecting the nation as a whole, proclaiming a unified message from a totalitarian regime” (Lacey, 2013a: 110).

Nazi propaganda broadcasts made much use of repetition. Kris and Speier observed that the Nazis preferred repetition to amplification because they believed that “repetition can make words all powerful over the mind, can make man a set of reactions to stimuli” (Kris and Speier, 1944: 23). Goebbels understood that coining and then repeating “distinctive phrases or slogans” enhanced radio propaganda (Doob, 1950: 435–436). He advocated repetition in propaganda, however only up to the point at which the material “has completely convinced the public.” Beyond that, repetition diminished the message (a point familiar to students of advertising communication, and one that was still being repeated and researched decades later) (Doob, 1950: 435). Consequently wartime Nazi radio turned increasingly to light entertainment so as not to exhaust listener interest in the political and propaganda themes of its broadcasts (Kallis, 2005: 35). Radio propaganda in general was often repetitive – as Siepmann pointed out in 1942: “we in America, familiar with the increasing profits won from advertising on the radio, are not likely to be in too great a hurry to discount the effectiveness of repetitive suggestion” (Siepmann, 1942: 6). In an ordinary half hour of American radio, Allport and Cantril had reported, the sponsor’s name was mentioned between 10 and 25 times (Cantril and Allport, 1935: 63).

Recent scholarship has revised the simple belief that Goebbels was the propaganda genius with total control over a totalitarian publicity machine. As Kallis summarizes, historians now see multiple propagandas emanating from the National Socialist regime, “that cumulatively (through their joint effect but often through their profound contradictions) made up what we may schematically call NS propaganda.” Radio, however, of all the available media, held the greatest potential for centralization and uniformity (Kallis, 2005: 8, 31–32). Historians also are more likely now to balance their assessment of the efficacy of Nazi propaganda in the early years with its inability after 1941 to effectively reset expectations or counter news of setbacks and defeats. After 1941, Kallis argues, “the official regime propaganda discourse became discordant with the perceptions of the vast majority of the German civilian population” (Kallis, 2005: 10). This happened in part because of Nazi radio’s habit of refuting stories propagated by enemy media. Zimmerman argues that this in the end sapped effectiveness and led to “the creation of media realms that were remote from the world in which most of the population lived” (Zimmerman, 2006: 433).

Internationally, World War II was the heyday of radio propaganda. Charles Siepmann wrote that “radio is an instrument of modern war” (Siepmann, 1942: 3). It became this because, as John B. Whitton explained in 1941, “the miracle of radio has made it much easier than before to spread propaganda in enemy territory. The methods formerly used, such as dropping leaflets from airplanes or free balloons, were very limited in range and influence” (Whitton, 1941: 588). Particularly in crowded and border-filled Europe, radio could in this historically novel way enable voices to be heard in enemy territory, opening up new possibilities for attack abroad and new dangers for morale at home. The personalizing of propaganda messages, and themes of seduction and intrigue, became the specialty of such legendary World War II women propaganda

broadcasters as Tokyo Rose and Axis Sally. American-born Iva Toguri, broadcasting from Tokyo as “Orphan Ann,” was most likely the “Tokyo Rose” of World War II notoriety. As Ann Pfau has shown, much of what circulated at the time as rumor and as memory ever since – Tokyo Rose’s uncanny knowledge of Allied troop movements; her insinuations about the sexual infidelity of wives and girlfriends back home – did not actually happen. Troops imagined hearing things, or heard rumors that they attributed in memory to these almost mythical propaganda broadcasters (Pfau: 2008: Ch. 5; Pfau and Hochfelder, 2009). Christine Ehrick, in a chapter on Urugayan feminist Paulina Luisi and Argentinian populist Evita Duarte (de Peron), has argued evocatively that the female radio propagandists’ combination of “the culturally disturbing qualities of (especially acousmatic) female speech with the uncanny intimacy of radio and the technique of modern propaganda” constituted a “key moment in twentieth-century sonic history” (Ehrick, 2015: 103).

Radio propaganda and the battle of international shortwave services remained important after World War II. During the Cold War, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and Voice of America attempted to reach audiences inside Communist bloc nations, using music as well as speech propaganda. Broadcast hate propaganda is widely credited with sparking the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, as Radio Rwanda urged the killing of Tutsi (Des Forges, 2007: 42–44). Radio advertising continued to be important and after decades of decline in the television era, radio’s market share of advertising began to rise again in the 1990s.

American communications research after World War II however severely qualified belief in the potency of radio propaganda. The “limited effects” theory, associated with communications scholars such as Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, rested upon a rejection of what they (inaccurately) characterized as an earlier belief in a “magic bullet” or “hypodermic needle” theory of propaganda (Goodman, 2011: 93–100; Sproule, 1989). The “limited effects” hypothesis led to scholarly skepticism about the persuasive effects of mass media alone and unaided. In their classic essay on “Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action,” Lazarsfeld and Merton argued that “the social role played by the very existence of the mass media has been commonly overestimated.” But their argument was that “local discussions” could reinforce the content of mass propaganda – they evoked something much more present and participatory than simply listening to the radio, but offered an argument about the significant effects of aural stimulus on attitudes nonetheless (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948: 98).

## Conclusion

“Limited effects” set the tone for postwar consideration of sound propaganda. Arguably radio propaganda diminished in importance in the television era. Nevertheless, political practice today in many nations places enormous emphasis on being “on message” and on the repetition of the key “talking points” of the day. The attachment to aural repetition and insistence on proactively framing the topics of the day are familiar strategies to students of radio propaganda – even as these tactics encounter difficulties in the more critical, interactive, and dialogic forms of contemporary media.

The most obvious thing to say about sound and propaganda in the internet age is that sound has become less central to communication. Radio survives, even thrives, and takes new digital forms – internet radio, podcasting, and so on. Talk radio retains very large audiences and arguably shapes even as it mirrors political attitudes and opinions. The proliferation of niche broadcasts, the possibility of individualizing one’s listening, work however against mass-scale influence and hence against high specific anxiety about sound propaganda (Lacey, 2013b). More broadly we live in a retextualising age. The ubiquitous mobile phone is rarely used for speaking or listening



– much more often it is a device for reading and looking at pictures and for sending text. The dominant concerns about media influence today do not concern sound but images and text. We can now therefore look back on the golden age of radio propaganda and of panic about it as a particularly intense moment in the long history of sound and propaganda.

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