

# Soft propaganda

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After World War II, the term 'propaganda' has acquired a negative connotation due to its association with dictators in history. In contemporary communication studies, this term is predominantly associated with authoritarian regimes, whereas in democratic settings, more neutral terms such as 'public diplomacy' or 'public campaigning' are preferred. The conventional study of propaganda generally refers to hard propaganda, designed not to convince but intimidate the ruled. With autocrats' skillful use of digital media, soft propaganda is a relatively new and more sophisticated way to capture the population's attention. A comparable term in democracy is 'infotainment', which encapsulates the phenomenon of packaging political information in entertaining formats during political campaigns (Baym & Holbert, 2020). Both soft propaganda and infotainment are entertainment-oriented, but soft propaganda seeks to enhance the accessibility or reader engagement with state media to persuade the public of the regime's merit, whereas infotainment can encompass entertainment, educational, or critical aspects.

Scholars have long pondered the possibility of using entertainment-oriented soft news to convey political information to an inattentive public (Baum, 2002). Soft propaganda is a relatively new area of research focused on how autocrats use sophisticated propaganda to exert control over their inattentive or attentive population in authoritarian regimes. As Bernays wrote in his seminal work, *Propaganda*, 'Propaganda is the executive arm of the government' (1928, p. 20). It is safer to launch crude and sophisticated propaganda together, so the state can reach 'the meanest as well as the keenest intelligence' (Lasswell, 1927, p. 215). The techniques employed by autocrats in promoting and implementing soft propaganda have become more sophisticated, reflecting the increasing prevalence of 'informational autocrats' who govern through the manipulation of information (Guriev & Treisman, 2022). Propaganda is centrally used in information-based, soft authoritarianism to maintain resilience. Digital and social media enable autocrats to explore new ways to stretch their rules and exert information control on an unprecedented scale. One novel

way is to entertain and attract citizens' attention to get their messages across.

Haifeng Huang (2018), in his influential work, asserts two main models of propaganda: 'hard propaganda' and 'soft propaganda'. The first model, known as "hard propaganda," involves the utilization of state-affiliated media to disseminate heavy-handed and rigid messages that are intentionally false, reminiscent of the propaganda slogans portrayed in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Its primary purpose is to indoctrinate the population, though people tend not to believe the actual content as it propagates pernicious and untruthful information about the regime and leader. Conversely, the second model employs 'soft propaganda', which resembles the enticing allure depicted in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, catering to people's recreational needs. Soft propaganda operates subtly, utilizing entertaining, emotion-inducing, and multimedia mediums to convey pro-regime messages.

Soft propaganda can be defined as a residual category encompassing all forms of propaganda that do not fit into the 'hard' category. All infotainment produced by state media in autocracies, in some way, is soft propaganda. It does not convey explicit political or public policy elements, instead focusing on sensational presentation and human-interest themes. Soft propaganda aims to captivate and engage audiences rather than distort facts or present absurdities as hard propaganda does. Indeed, discerning between soft and hard propaganda can be challenging as the boundary between them is often blurred. This entry will investigate the following four perspectives of soft propaganda: its characteristics, its distinctions from hard propaganda, its effectiveness in influencing opinions in the social media age, and future directions for research.

## What does soft propaganda look like?

Soft propaganda can manifest in various media genres. It can be conveyed through multimedia features such as images, songs, movies, talk shows, video clips, documentaries, soap operas, artistic performances, and other viral social media content. The content is adapted to appeal to the audience's preferences, particularly in the digital age with advancements in technology. Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all information

transmitted through multimedia content by state-affiliated media qualifies as propaganda.

Soft propaganda is characterized by its entertainment value and ability to evoke emotional resonance. Unlike the distorted or preposterous messages often found in hard propaganda, soft propaganda aims to be lively, engaging, and interesting. The messages conveyed through soft propaganda are subtle, sophisticated, and credible. One example of a successful soft propaganda is the 2019 Chinese anthology drama film *My People, My Country*. This film was released to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Renowned filmmakers, actors, and actresses came together to portray true stories based on historical events, including the triumph of the national women's volleyball team winning a gold medal in the 1984 Olympics. It garnered a broad domestic and overseas audience, instilling nationalist sentiment and stylized praise for the regime, and earned over 300 million USD in its opening weekend.

Another type of soft propaganda involves pure entertainment aimed at amusing citizens. Soap operas have gained popularity worldwide, and online platforms focused on video content have transformed people's media consumption habits. By the end of 2020, the number of individuals using live-streaming video apps like TikTok (a platform for clips and short videos) had exceeded 870 million in China, more than twice the population of the United States (Xia, 2022). The Russia-based VKontakte, the most popular social media platform in Ukraine back in 2017, supplies digital media-based soft propaganda and 'pro-Russian, anti-Western' narratives in various forms (Surowiec, 2017, p. 24). State-run media accounts produce a significant amount of purely entertaining videos that are unrelated to any aspects of government or politics but attract millions of citizens to follow (Lu & Pan, 2021b). Videos created by state-run media, often considered the primary producers of state propaganda, are not easily distinguishable from those produced by market-oriented media. Russia-based RT's (and similarly Sputnik and Russia Direct's) international broadcasting is packaged for liberals with 'sugarcoating of a sweet and sour flavor', making it very popular to Western audiences before it was banned on YouTube (Surowiec, 2017, p. 25). State-run media, traditionally assumed to prioritize the

promotion of officially endorsed values, now adapt the forms and styles of propaganda to cater to popular preferences, especially on social media.

The implications of this entertainment-oriented phenomenon are twofold. First, when state-run media produces content that appears unrelated to shaping people's perception of the regime, it becomes challenging to categorize purely entertaining content as soft propaganda for indoctrination purposes. The boundary between politics and entertainment becomes blurred (Baym & Holbert, 2020). Second, due to the difficulty in distinguishing the actors involved, individuals are more likely to be exposed to messages produced by state-run media on social media platforms, where both state-run and market-oriented media outlets can create equally appealing materials.

### Contrasting soft and hard propaganda

Soft propaganda, subtle and persuasive, aims to influence recipients' opinions (Huang, 2018). On the other hand, hard propaganda messages are 'crude, heavy-handed, or preposterous' (Huang, 2018). Hard propaganda, consisting of one-sided, exaggerated, or fabricated information, seems clumsy and ossified, heightening people's awareness of absurdity and country's political plight (Huang, 2018). Because the messages are hard to believe, they are not intended to induce persuasion (Huang, 2015). This type of propaganda might even weaken a regime's appeal (Chang, 2021). Instead, such messages serve to showcase the strength, capabilities, and resources of the government by manipulating the news and inflating the leader's achievement, thus aiming to intimidate the masses. As a result, state-run media have distinct purposes when disseminating media messages, whether for persuasion or deterrence.

Current research on propaganda in authoritarian regimes continues to predominantly focus on hard propaganda, investigating why leaders disseminate harmful and false information that no-one takes seriously (Huang, 2018). In contrast, while popular cultural forms are nothing new, research on soft propaganda is still emerging (Lu & Pan, 2021b; Mattingly & Yao, 2022; Xia, 2022; Zhu & Fu, 2023; Zou, 2023). In response to the shift towards digitized technology and the media

landscape, state-run media have become adept at packaging propaganda content in casual, playful, and interactive media formats such as mini-games, video clips, talk shows, and social media posts. The media genres associated with soft propaganda starkly contrast with those of hard propaganda. Taking advantage of digital media, soft propaganda has the potential to reach a broader audience, including individuals who are apathetic to politics and politically astute citizens who seek amusement.

### More effective at changing minds in digital media?

Early research in propaganda, motivated by Hitler's seemingly effective use of media in propaganda in radio use, featured the so-called 'needle' theory. This theory assumed that the media could simply inject messages into people and brainwash them with propaganda. The first waves of large-scale studies in 1950s and 1960s found, quite surprisingly, that mass media has minimal effects on changing respondents' predispositions. Scholars studying propaganda in authoritarian regimes more recently have found that while propaganda is intended to alter mass beliefs, it is often found to be ineffective (Huang, 2018; Mattingly & Yao, 2022).

When considering the impact of soft propaganda, its content may also have little impact on persuading people. A classic set of rigorous experiments showed that finely crafted army-oriented propaganda films helped viewers learn factual knowledge, but that their attitudes remained largely unchanged (Hovland et al., 1949). Researchers express concerns about the potential for entertainment media to overshadow the consumption of political news, resulting in fewer politically sophisticated citizens engaging with political issues and discussions (Van Aelst et al., 2017). However, if soft propaganda manages to enhance users' stickiness to media brands and foster brand loyalty, non-political content from the media could serve as a gateway for actual political propaganda in the digital age (Zhu & Fu, 2023). Moreover, if political content can be skillfully packaged in a sentimental manner to evoke emotions, it can amplify its effectiveness in shaping people's beliefs.

Cutting-edge research in the digital media age reveals that when media platforms adopt an infotainment approach, their popularity

tends to increase (Zhu & Fu, 2023). With a larger audience drawn to appealing non-political content, state-run media can effectively deliver ideological messages. People who engage with soft propaganda as a gateway may subsequently maintain their attention on traditionally dogmatic propaganda. Similarly, Lu and Pan (2021a) find that state-run media often use eye-catching 'clickbait' titles to increase the visibility of hard propaganda because non-political content can boost users' favorability toward the media outlets. Consequently, this can increase the likelihood of individuals consuming political propaganda online.

Soft propaganda campaigns also often target people's emotions. An editor at the *People's Daily*, a prominent state-run media outlet in China, noted that content on social media platforms primarily revolves around strong and stimulating emotions such as anger, nationalism, and amusement. Weaker stimuli tend to be less likely to prompt users to share and repost content (Zou, 2023). Consequently, *People's Daily* has been publishing an online column featuring articles designed to evoke emotions reminiscent of 'chicken soup' stories, known for heartwarming or inspirational anecdotes to uplift others and to connect with politically apathetic audiences. These entry serve as transmitters of 'positive energy' to foster hopefulness and uplifting attitudes. Soft propaganda also reinforces nationalist rhetoric. Through experimental studies, Mattingly and Yao (2022) show that emotionally gripping soft propaganda has a long-lasting effect on increasing people's anti-foreign nationalist attitudes. However, this type of soft propaganda does not enhance people's evaluation of state performance.

### Future research

Recent studies on soft propaganda present us with two challenges. First, it is challenging to precisely define what constitutes soft propaganda. As discussed earlier, soft propaganda involves entertaining and emotionally resonant content. However, since the definition of propaganda content has expanded to include non-political news and entertaining materials, it becomes difficult to establish clear boundaries for soft propaganda. The term is often used broadly to encompass all materials produced by state-sponsored media. Therefore, we need to draw the line between propaganda

and non-propaganda when both types of content are entertaining.

Second, as previously discussed, there are two types of propaganda: hard and soft. Soft propaganda is more subtle, emotionally captivating, and effective in shaping audience beliefs. However, distinguishing the distinct purposes of soft and hard propaganda, as outlined in the literature—one aimed at changing beliefs and the other at intimidating citizens—may prove difficult and is worth further exploration in future research.

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