

Propaganda and Society

Lecturer: Todd Nesbitt, Ph.D.

Course Description:

This course explores persuasion and propaganda in a comparative, developmental context with an emphasis on understanding approaches and techniques over time. It traces the emergence of strategic persuasive communication and propaganda from its origins to the present day. The basic principles, philosophy, and techniques of propaganda in different periods are considered, with an emphasis on contemporary contexts. Students will learn to identify different propaganda techniques and will examine the impact on public opinion and societal change. A developmental approach is used in order to allow the opportunity to see aspects of continuity and change in approaches. A combination of classic and contemporary texts concerning propaganda and disinformation will be studied. While the first half of the course examines the history of propaganda until the emergence of social media, the second half of the course focuses on computational and participatory propaganda, and the impact in central Europe with a focus on the Czech Republic.

Course Objectives/Learning Outcomes:

Specialist knowledge:

Students will be able to:

- Comprehend the philosophical, historical and functional underpinnings of propaganda; - Trace the history of mass persuasion from ancient civilization to today's global technological society;
- Identify and discuss criteria that are indicative of a media propaganda campaign; - Explain how and why particular major media of communication have been used for mass persuasion in different societies at different times;
- Identify and explain contemporary methods of computational propaganda and disinformation, and the impact on society.

Specialist skills:

Students will be able to:

- Recognize and critically evaluate propaganda campaigns;
- Examine applications of persuasion in the "emerging technologies" and explain their possible effects on the present and future users of these technologies;
- Conduct basic independent research on propaganda;

- Become knowledgeable with some key academic literature and research methods on propaganda.

Course Requirements:

- **Engagement:** Engagement is similar to participation, but it means more than just active involvement in class activities (although that is a basic tenet). Being engaged means demonstrating the following knowledge and skills: (a) being accountable and taking responsibility; (b) leadership; (c) integrity and honesty; (d) being engaged with the topic and the class; (e) striving for excellence in all endeavors. Specifically, it means things like following up without being told to follow up; doing what you are supposed to do when you are supposed to do it and as well as you can do it; arriving on time and ready to “work;” keeping the faculty member aware of any situations that might impinge upon your performance; and fostering a relationship of mutual respect.
- **Disinformation Case Study:** During the course, students will present a case study of the disinformation environment of another country. The focus in the course will be the Czech Republic and Central Europe, but contemporary hybrid warfare is global. The aim of this task is to share knowledge with the class about the situation in other countries, allowing us to compare and contrast contexts.
- **Reflection papers:** Students will write 4 short reaction papers based on class field trips, events and activities. The aim of these papers is to demonstrate critical thinking by integrating course concepts and practical experience.
- **Exams:** Two examinations will be taken, one during week seven of the course and a final exam covering all course content during the final examination period. Test format may combine a mixture of short answer, true/false, matching, sort answer, and one or two essay questions covering all readings, lecture, hand-out and class discussion content.

Grading Policy:

The course will be graded on the basis of:

Criteria	Value	Due Date
Engagement	15%	Weekly
Disinformation Case Study	20%	TBA
Midterm	20%	TBA
Final Exam	25%	TBA
Reflection papers	4 x 5%	4 times during semester

Mandatory Completion Policy

Note that all mandatory assignments and exams must be completed to the best of your ability in order for your final grade to be issued. Failure to complete a mandatory assignment or exam may result in a failing grade.

Letter Grade	Percentage	Description
A+	97-100	Excellent Work
A	93-97	Outstanding Work
A-	90-92	
B+	87-89	Good work
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Acceptable Work
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Work that is significantly below average
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	0-59	Work that does not meet the minimum standards for passing the course

AEP Academic Integrity Policy

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are not tolerated. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the development of knowledge and learning is encouraged at many stages of the learning process. While we value technology for educational purposes, we also value originality and the retainment of knowledge, and thus using AI for assignments and examinations, even if rephrased, is strictly prohibited and considered an academic integrity violation, unless the instructor explicitly allows for it in the context of evaluated work

AEP Non-Discrimination/Harassment Policy

The AEP program in Prague promotes a diverse learning environment where the dignity, worth, and differences of each individual are valued and respected. Discrimination and harassment, whether based on a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or other legally protected characteristics, are repugnant and completely inconsistent with our objectives. Retaliation against individuals for raising good faith claims of harassment and/or discrimination is prohibited.

AEP Diversity Policy

AEP is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming community that values diversity in all its forms. We believe that one of the most meaningful lessons of studying abroad is learning to navigate and appreciate differences with curiosity and an open mind. While engaging across differences can sometimes be challenging or uncomfortable, these moments are essential for growth and learning. We recognize that every member of our community, even with the best intentions, may occasionally make missteps. Our commitment is to provide a supportive environment where respectful and honest dialogue helps us learn from these experiences, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive and broaden their perspective.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1

CEE Introductory Lecture Series

AEP Introductory Lecture Series

Week 2

Introduction to Propaganda & Persuasion

Exploring what propaganda and persuasion are, approaches to defining them, characteristics, models, and more. Introduction to the disinformation scene in the Czech Republic. The overall purpose of this week is to form a base upon which to build over the next few weeks. **Field Trip:** Discussion with journalists at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Week 3

Propaganda until the 20th Century

Looking back into history to see the origins and development of propaganda so that we can appreciate how practices emerged, progressed, solidified, and adapted to technological and societal change over time.

Week 4

Mass Society and Mass Propaganda

Exploring the connections between propaganda, the emergence of the mass media, and the needs for self-identity and self-validation in mass society. We consider each medium for its propaganda potential, since it is never as simple as harnessing a medium and sending a message that has impact.

Week 5

Propaganda and Psychological Warfare 1900-1950

Looking at the propaganda activities which spawned an entire field of study, with particular emphasis on atrocity propaganda. Paradigms for analyzing propaganda are introduced.

Week 6

Prop and Psychological Warfare 1950-2000

Although the field of study had receded, and the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were relatively silent in terms of attention to the study of propaganda, propaganda campaigns were roaring in the background. This week we take a look at the nature of propaganda after almost fifty years of development. **Field Trip:** Film and discussion with directors of Waves (Vlny)

Week 7

Midterm Exam

Celebration of learning!

Week 8

Computational Propaganda

This session we get to the nitty gritty of contemporary online propaganda. We examine what activities are taking place, where they fit into the propaganda model and process, and assess the significance and impact.

Week 9

Understanding Disinformation in Czechia

This week we go deep into the impact of disinformation and propaganda on Czech society. We analyze the impact on citizens, consider the sources, and assess the data. **Field trip:** Film and discussion with directors of Change My Mind (Velký vlastenecký výlet).

Week 10

Disinformation in Detail

This session we continue our examination of contemporary online propaganda. After the last two sessions' case studies in computational propaganda and basics of disinformation we continue, looking in depth at what it is, and how it works. We will think about if, when, and how it succeeds, how it spreads, and more. Multiple case studies from the contemporary Czech environment are assessed to illustrate.

Week 11

Participatory Propaganda

This week we will look at participatory online propaganda and think about how we actively participate in the spread of it, not like in the top-down approach of the past. **Field trip:** Walking in the steps of totalitarian Prague, with historical context of ideology and resistance (Strahov, Vitkov, Bunkr Bezovka).

Week 12

The Decline of Institutional Authority & the Potential for Healing

Is disinformation the problem, or a symptom of a larger problem? What solutions have been found to the propaganda problem? What about the audience? Do we actually know about how people are affected by propaganda after 100 years of research?

Week 13

Final Exam

Final celebration of learning!

Readings:

Core readings listed in the schedule (below) will be located in the course space in Moodle in the corresponding week of class. A selection of these are:

- Jowett G. & O'Donnell V. (2018). Propaganda and persuasion (7th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Cull N. J. Culbert D. H. & Welch D. (2003). Propaganda and mass persuasion: a historical encyclopedia 1500 to the present. ABC-CLIO.
- Baines P. O'Shaughnessy N. J. & Snow N. (2020). The sage handbook of propaganda. SAGE Publications.
- Bennett W. L. Livingston S. & Cambridge University Press. (2021). The disinformation age: Politics technology and disruptive communication. Cambridge University Press.
- Nesbitt, T. and MacGregor Pelikánová, R. Attacks on the European Green Deal: A Snapshot of the Czech Disinformation Scene in Action. Ostrava: VSB – Technical University of Ostrava, 2024. ISBN 978-80-248-4733-7 (print).
- PSSI. (2023). Business models of the Czech disinformation landscape. Prague Security Studies Institute.

#	THEME	NOTES	Readings
1	Introduction to Propaganda & Persuasion		Encyclopedia of Propaganda (Cull, Culbert, Welch)
2	Propaganda until the 20 th Century	RFE/RL - FIELD TRIP 1	Propaganda Through Ages (Jowett & O'Donnell)
3	Mass Society and Mass Propaganda + Propaganda & Psycho Warfare 1900-1950		Advertising The Ubiquitous Propaganda (Jowett & O'Donnell) + 7 Devices (Sproule) + Atrocities, Investigations & Propaganda (Lawson)
4	Propaganda and Psycho Warfare 1950-2000 Pt. 1	Group 1 Presentation	Propaganda in the Cold War (Cull & Mazumdar) + Ellul's Propaganda
5	Propaganda and Psycho Warfare 1950-2000 Pt. 2	WAVES - FIELD TRIP 2	Information-Age Conflict in the Post-Cold War Era (Taylor)
6	MIDTERM EXAM!	-	-
7	Computational Propaganda	Group 2 Presentation	Computational Propaganda and the Rise of the Fake Audience (Delwiche)
8	BREAK!		
8	Understanding Disinformation in Czechia	VLAST VYLET – FIELD TRIP 3	The Audience is the Amplifier: Participatory Propaganda (Wanless, Berk)
9	Disinformation in Detail	Group 3 Presentation	From Disinfo. To Fake News: Forwards into the Past (O'Shaughnessy)
10	Effects of propaganda: Are we all casualties?	STRAHOV - FIELD TRIP 4	The psychological drivers of misinformation belief
11	Decline of Institutional Authority	Group 4 Presentation	Solutions and Challenges for Addressing Misinformation (Martell & Rand)
12	FINAL EXAM		