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“How our information wars began – in World War I”

‘Historian John Maxwell Hamilton on the legacy of wiretapping and propaganda’

by John Maxwell Hamilton

One hundred years ago this Monday, after German troops marched into Belgium, Britain declared war and scarcely an hour later it sent its cable ship *Alert* into the English Channel. By dawn, amid heavy rain and wind, the crew had severed Germany’s five most important Atlantic cables. For the duration of the war, Berlin’s ability to communicate abroad, even with many of its embassies, was impaired.

Today we take for granted that information warfare — whether the disruption of other nations’ computer systems, the [monitoring of citizens’ telephone calls](#) to detect terrorist threats or the use of social media to shape foreign attitudes — is a key tool of national security. These measures, and the debates about their proper limits in a democracy, seem unprecedented because they are driven by new technologies. But virtually all our concerns about such tactics find their roots in the Great War, particularly in its first hours, when the *Alert*’s hatchet-wielding crew began its work.

The notion of winning the “hearts and minds” of local populations, so common to discussions of war today, played out not only abroad but at home a century ago. The unprecedented scale of World War I required mass domestic mobilization. Governments had to persuade their citizens to serve in the military or, if they stayed at home, to conserve precious resources, pay higher taxes, buy war bonds and patriotically stick with the war as it dragged bloodily along.

While the British sprinted ahead in disrupting communications, all belligerents quickly sought the high ground in the battle of propaganda. The same day the Germans invaded Belgium, they issued a “White Book” justifying their actions to the world. Similar reports, known by the rainbow of colors on their covers, followed: a British “Blue Book” on Aug. 6, a Russian “Orange Book” on Aug. 16 and so forth until the French, who were especially egregious in omitting and falsifying facts, issued a “Yellow Book” on Dec. 1.

The warring nations understood that propaganda is a function of both what is said and what is not said. The first German government press directive included in its list of prohibited subjects any mention of censorship itself. The French banned references to a former finance minister who favored diplomatic solutions to disagreements with Germany. Despite its long democratic tradition, the British government kept secret the existence of the propaganda agency it created at Wellington House.

The United States was a key propaganda target. The Germans wanted it to stay out of the war and hoped the American government would press the British to relax their naval blockade. The British wanted all the material support possible and a free hand to tighten the noose around Germany. The blockade, plus control of transatlantic cables, allowed the British to intercept American communications, including consular mail, which they did shamelessly. This was a major source of irritation to Washington, much as the Germans took umbrage at U.S. [tapping of Chancellor Angela Merkel's cellphone](#).

The Germans aggressively courted German Americans and the legislators who represented them. To reach mass audiences, they bought U.S. newspapers, at one point even considering the purchase of The Washington Post. But the Germans were clumsy. Their chief propagandist in the United States was so intemperate in his remarks, most notably with an over-the-top defense of Germany's sinking of the passenger ship Lusitania, that he had to return home. Two German military attaches, who had the odd dual responsibilities of propaganda and the sabotage of American plants supplying the Allies, were expelled when documents revealed their plans to foment labor strikes and contained unflattering comments about President Woodrow Wilson.

In contrast was Britain's Sir Gilbert Parker, whose work seems like a precursor to social media. Married to an American and well known to U.S. readers, the novelist headed a secret program in which he and other leading British figures urged the Allied viewpoint in seemingly innocent letters to American influentials. In one of his reports, which survive in the British archives, Parker noted, "In the eyes of the American people the quiet and subterranean nature of our work has the appearance of a purely private patriotism and enterprise."

Americans came late to the war. But within a week of entering in April 1917, President Wilson launched the nation's first effort to systematically shape public attitudes, the Committee on Public Information. The CPI was headquartered in a brick rowhouse still standing on Lafayette Square. Its director, the aggressive journalist George Creel, frequently walked the short distance to the White House. He was considered one of the half-dozen most influential political figures in Washington during the war.

The CPI's influence at home was manifested in articles, cartoons and advertisements in newspapers and magazines; in public school lessons, university textbooks and Sunday sermons; in talks at movie theaters, Indian reservations and anywhere else the CPI's 75,000 Four Minute Men (volunteers charged with delivering short speeches on the war effort) found an audience; in feature films and in ads on theater curtains; in posters plastered on buildings and on storefronts; in pamphlets distributed by the millions.

Abroad, Creel's staff set up reading rooms, tested techniques for dropping leaflets in enemy territory by air, established a cable news service and distributed movies with propaganda value. To a degree never seen before for a president's pronouncements, the CPI promoted Wilson's idealistic rhetoric overseas.

The men and women of the CPI were muckrakers, suffragists, municipal reformers and leading progressive educators. Their legacy includes the public affairs officers in our embassies, who explain American values abroad, and the Federal Register, which evolved from a CPI publication

created to bring the daily actions of government to light. Yet in making the world “safe for democracy,” the CPI could not resist using its considerable powers to set anti-democratic precedents.

Creel headed off official news censorship domestically, but the CPI suppressed and sanitized news — and views. “News itself must be given a new definition,” he said. The committee extolled transparency but supplied the news media with stories that were not identified as CPI-written, and created front organizations to work with immigrant groups and labor. The CPI foreswore emotional propaganda, but with other domestic propaganda groups pushing it along, the committee contributed to hate propaganda against Germany and German Americans. One war poster, referring to Germany, declared: “Such a civilization is not fit to live.”

Overseas the CPI subsidized publications and bribed editors. Zealousness and naivete led it to publicize bogus documents aimed at undermining the Bolshevik revolution, an act that contributed to deteriorating ties with the new Russian government. In its efforts to stifle dissent, the CPI became an accomplice to the trampling of civil liberties under such laws as the 1917 Espionage Act.

That act is a legal basis for the current administration’s [prosecution of journalists and leakers](#). And that is just one ominous echo. When National Security Agency officials resist explaining the extent to which they burrow into our lives, we can hear Creel arguing for squelching public discussion of postal censorship. When the Obama administration discourages journalists’ access to government officials, we hear Wilson’s secretary of state insisting that none of his subordinates speak to the press. For his part, Wilson advocated “pitiless publicity” of government actions but suspended presidential news conferences for the duration of the war on the grounds that he was too busy.

Before the Great War, the authoritative Encyclopedia Britannica had no entry for “propaganda.” The subject was not deemed significant. In the edition published shortly after the war, an entry on propaganda ran nearly 10 pages of small, dense type. Its pithy definition hinted at the odious connotation the word had acquired: “Those engaged in a propaganda may genuinely believe that success will be an advantage to those whom they address, but the stimulus to their action is their own cause.”

The CPI was a catalyst for government opinion-molding, which has become so pervasive it is impossible to identify all the people who engage in it during all or part of their workday. It also is a lesson in a fundamental threat to democracy — the too-easy morphing of wholesome government information that the public needs to reach sound opinions into the distortion and suppression of information inconvenient to a leader’s objectives.

The most profound legacy of the information war of a century ago is the doubt it planted about the integrity of government. “This whole discussion about the ways and means of controlling public opinion testifies to the collapse of the traditional species of democratic romanticism,” a leading scholar in the new field of propaganda, Harold Lasswell, wrote in 1927. “. . . That credulous utopianism, which fed upon the mighty words which exploited the hopes of the mass in war, has in many minds given way to cynicism and disenchantment.”

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