

Review 5

Title: Propaganda and counter-terrorism. Strategies for global change. By Emma Louise Briant. (2016). 304 p. Manchester: Manchester University Press. ISBN: 978-0719091056

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Dr. Emma Briant works at Sheffield University, where she researches amongst other things propaganda and censorship by the government and examines the consequences of changes in the media for these phenomena. The book is about the communicational part of the battle against terrorism, as it has been fought by the western world since the attacks of 9/11.

While some anti-terrorism measures, like the military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the power of the intelligence agencies, have been widely debated, this cannot be said about the propaganda strategies. Briant gathered information about the strategies that have been adopted by the US and the UK through many interviews with key players in both countries, from journalists to employees of the government and intelligence agencies and by desk research of a vast number of relevant documents.

There are many studies about the relationship between the US and the UK and their cooperation in foreign policy and military operations. However, in regard to the intelligence agencies, researchers mainly focused on information-gathering and not on the strategically spreading of information (Scott, 2004). Briant succeeds in combining literature from different scientific areas: from security, to communications research and literature about organizational dynamics.

In the first chapter, Briant provides us with a brief overview of the literature about propaganda. Starting with the ancient Greek philosophers, she shows the reader different perspectives on the pros and cons of propaganda and sets a historical context for this topic. Even though this can be considered common knowledge for most scholars in the social sciences, this might not be as evident for all readers and with this introduction she makes sure everybody has the same elementary knowledge of the field. She also introduces the relations between the US and the UK and the world of security agencies and the anti-terrorism efforts that have been conducted by these countries.

Using many illustrative interview fragments, Briant demonstrates how propaganda is being used by both countries in their battle against terrorism, the similarities and differences between the countries and also the development that we can see in their approach throughout time.

The second chapter describes changes that have occurred in the way propaganda was viewed and treated by those involved. Traditional boundaries between propaganda for your own country and for other countries and between the execution institutions did not seem appropriate anymore in the global fight against terrorism. The military involvement became bigger to bypass these problems. A development that has been strengthened by the internet. This led to more covert actions that create risks for the people of a country: "Covert propaganda impairs the audience's ability to make an informed judgement of the credibility of the source of the information." (p. 91).

These developments and the increasing use of propaganda, created a need for strategic coordination. In the third chapter, Briant describes how this evolved and the difficulties both countries faced. Especially the United States had a difficulty coordinating their efforts because of relatively little discipline and the sheer size of the institutions involved. This impacted the cooperation between the two countries as well, or as Briant puts it in the third chapter: "The chapter highlights systemic problems and planning responses, which will in subsequent chapters be shown to have shaped the countries' relationship and the inter-country planning structures that coordinated joint propaganda efforts." (p. 95).

However, these 'systemic problems' did not always lead to problems in practice. Even though formal planning was relatively absent, informal planning and coordination did occur. Briant describes the working of this by using some examples, like the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the role of different government agencies in the propaganda during these wars that make it very clear.

The fifth chapter focuses more on the relations between the US and the UK. It describes some relevant differences in their cultural and political background but most importantly how their cooperation helped them. The UK was able to complement the strength of the US and by this cooperation they could handle the difficulties both countries individually faced. That also created some balance in the relationship between the two countries, since the US was far stronger militarily and economically, but the UK was better at external propaganda efforts.

The sixth chapter applies everything we have seen in the previous chapters to a specific case: The Iraq war. It describes the cooperation between the US and the UK in this war and the planning and coordination of the efforts of both countries. It also describes the problematic internal use of propaganda regarding this war: "The UK media subjected the Iraq invasion to more scrutiny than their counterparts in the US, but this was constrained by strong and increasingly coordinated strategic efforts to 'manage' public opinion regarding the war." (p. 223). Then finally, in the last chapter, Briant discusses the impact of her own research.

Briant presents a picture of propaganda efforts that have drastically changed in the past two decades. Propaganda increasingly reaches internal audiences that it was not directly targeting, through the internet and social media. And where war efforts and therefore propaganda used to be clearly delimited to a specific country and period of time, we now have a possibly endless and boundary-less war on terror on our hands. Propaganda will also become more and more important in fighting wars, because now and in the future wars will no longer be won by military dominance alone but by the party that is best

able to understand and change the behaviour of the other party (Mackay & Tatham, 2009).

This warrants new rules for the use of propaganda by government agencies. However, the methods adopted by these agencies have mainly changed organically in the past years without any involvement or even information for citizens and most politicians. It was not even strategically planned by the heads of these organizations because the changes were made in practice by the individuals involved. This should not continue like this and Briant's book can be a step in the right direction. There is still a long way to go though, based on the views of people Briant has interviewed: "Yet if we take as evidence the views of many of the public servants interviewed here, still today public opinion is viewed as ignorant and unstable." (p. 247). But by informing scholars, politicians and the public about what is going on, Briant lays the foundation for change.

It is too bad though that Briant does not succeed completely in making this information accessible for the broader public. The book is overall well written but a lot of quotes, abbreviations and the technical style do not help its reader-friendliness. However, when you are able to read through this, Briant makes your efforts very worthwhile.

References

- Mackay, A., & Tatham, S. (2009). *Behavioural Conflict*. Saffron Waldon: Military Studies Press.
- Scott, L. (2004). Secret intelligence, covert action and clandestine diplomacy. *Intelligence and National Security*, 19(2), 322-341.