

(Untangling) The History Of PR: Propaganda Relations

by
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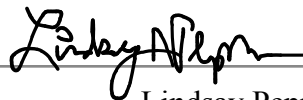
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Cover Art and Title.....	4
Podcast Production.....	6
Website Building.....	7
Power, Platforms, and Parasocial Relationships.....	9
Recap, Research, and Reflection.....	12
Conclusion:.....	13
Referenced Works:.....	15

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Furthermore, I would like to express my immense gratitude for the support of Dr. Volha Kananovich and Dr. Andrew Davis for being so willing to participate in this project and believing in me every step of the way. Thank you to my loving parents and first support system, John and Christine Halk, who have supported me and my educational journey throughout my entire life. They have always worked tirelessly to provide me with the best opportunities possible and without their endless support, I would not be the woman I am today. Thank you also to my siblings, in-laws, and boyfriend for always pushing me out of my comfort zone and having me reach a little higher. Lastly, I wanted to thank my grandparents, although I lost them a few years ago, I know their love and support are unmatched.

Abstract

For a bit of background, I had the honor of taking an elective with one of our most distinguished teachers, Dr. Wesley Kirkpatrick, during my senior year of high school. This course was simply titled, *Shoah*, which is translated to *The Holocaust* in Hebrew. This course was one of the most eye-opening and rewarding experiences of my life since it strengthened my fervor for studying history. Dr. Kirkpatrick made it a strict point that we were to watch the *Shoah* documentary in its entirety, which is roughly nine hours long.¹

When advisors and family members asked me about my thesis sophomore year, I knew that I wanted to combine my public relations major with my interest in World War II. This is how *(Untangling) The History of PR: Propaganda Relations* was born; although it did not happen overnight, I knew that discussing propaganda history and how it ties into modern times with social media was a solid first step.

The remainder of this paper will showcase the creative process I took while creating this podcast and its website. I decided to take the creative route regarding this thesis since history and propaganda deserve to be discussed in public, accessibly, and with the potential to reach a wider audience, rather than merely written in an Honors thesis downloaded by very few. This artist statement is meant to contextualize and clarify the process, intentions, and goals of this Honors thesis, which is represented in the voices, conversations, references, and reflections of myself and the experts I interviewed. It points to the artistic creation that resulted from this project, which is the interactive podcast and website that I will discuss in great length below.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FirfB4jSK8Y&feature=youtu.be>

Cover Art and Title

I wanted to combine my public relations degree with my passion for broadcasting in this thesis, which is why I created this podcast and its additional digital archives. I wanted to highlight my creativity through various platforms and applications; I also wanted to gain new skills to use in my post-grad endeavors. Lastly, I wanted this project to be something I look back on years from now as something I am still proud of. I hope it can be used to inspire future Honors students and spark creativity for their own theses.

I decided to use Canva to create my podcast logo as I have used it in previous courses and for my job as Director of Interactive Media for 90.5 WASU FM (see image below). This platform is very user-friendly, offering templates for those that do not want to start from scratch. I also used a podcast cover template but added my own image and color theme to suit my needs and the needs of the podcast.

As a communication major, I am a creative person and I wanted my podcast cover art to showcase my personality so any listener can tune in and get a glimpse of my personality before even pressing play. This podcast format is casual, having genuine conversations with the professors I interview with only a few questions as a starting point and the conversations flow from there.²

The title, *Untangling the History of PR*, is in a different font than the rest of the text to make it stand out and make the art eye-catching. I wanted the title to be clever but related to the content of the podcast itself, hence the *Untangling the History of PR: Propaganda Relations*. In the podcast, we touch on the history of public relations and how its practitioners were named “spin doctors” based on misleading the public’s opinion on any given topic. The term, *Spin*

² file:///C:/Users/ehalk/Downloads/Ellis%20and%20Patti,%20With%20Heart.pdf

doctors, combines two words to serve as a demeaning title to give to journalists, PR professionals, and others involved in the press. *Spin* relates to sports and how it can be pitched to the public in a way the pitcher intends, whether accurate or not. Pairing it with the word *doctor* allows it to seem credible or make it favorable to its creator; simply put, it is the manipulation of information.³ As a public relations major, I wanted to mention its history to educate the audience on what exactly public relations professionals do, to overcome this negative connotation. Through listening to the podcast and the external resources provided on its website, my goal is for the audience to understand the significant difference between propaganda and public relations, in an effort to push back against growing tides of dis/misinformation in the globalized, socially-mediated world in which we live.



³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312540156_Spin_Doctoring

Podcast Production

Before starting this thesis project, I had no experience with creating a podcast and the uploading process. I knew that I wanted a strictly audio podcast to have listeners focus on the content rather than get distracted by the host, guest, and background. There are so many tools out there that are tailored to this type of work, and I decided to use two different software applications to edit and produce this podcast: Audacity and Spotify for Podcasters (formerly called Anchor).

I used Spotify for Podcasters to record the raw audio and upload the final episodes to Spotify, making it simple to upload and distribute. Audacity's function is within the editing stages to shorten clips, splice them together, and remove filler words. Additionally, Audacity adds music underneath the vocals to enhance the vibe of each episode.

Editing a podcast to get clear, concise audio with an underlying acoustic track is more time-consuming than I expected. For example, 45 minutes of raw audio took several hours over three days to get a rough cut of an episode. However, I wanted to keep some of the filler words and background noise (squeaking chairs and cars driving by) to show that it intends to have an academic and organic conversation without being heavily produced or scripted. I allowed the interviewee to see some of the questions and themes in order to have them prepare for the interview without it being too structured in its formatting.⁴

⁴ See Page 17.

Website Building

Unlike the podcast, I did have some prior experience with working on websites through creating a portfolio for my anticipated college graduation and my position at the radio station. I decided to use the website builder I am most familiar with, Wix⁵, as it has tons of templates to choose from similar to Canva and there is a free version as well.⁶

I wanted a homepage that encompassed the podcast as a whole, giving a summary of what it is and what I hope to achieve. Additionally, all episodes are on the same page linked directly to Spotify for easy access and listening. This makes my undergraduate Honors thesis a greater part of the public conversation, rather than only commenting academically about public discourse.

After interviewing Dr. Davis, I realized listeners were unable to see the images and articles we referenced in the episode due to it being a strictly audio podcast. This was the primary reason for creating the website: for viewing referenced texts and images, as well as to serve as a guide for further research. This resource allows listeners to be a part of the conversation and interact with it and the references we discuss. Being able to interact with content and cross-reference sources are medial and information literacy skills essential to understanding, unpacking, and navigating propaganda today. The hope was for this project to exemplify and embody these needed contemporary media and information literacy practices.

Building on this, in both interviews, there was a common theme of the importance of education: educating ourselves on ways we can screen propaganda in digital spaces and

⁵ <https://emilyhalk.wixsite.com/historyofpr>

⁶ <https://support.wix.com/en/article/building-a-website-for-free>

educating the next generation. I hope this website will serve as an educational tool for listeners who are looking for more information about propaganda or information we covered in the episodes. I understand how hard it is to find quality sources online without spending countless hours seeing if they are credible. By interviewing industry professionals and academic experts, the work they have provided me is credible and used in college-level courses. This project aims to be an archive of credible information about navigating propaganda today.

Power, Platforms, and Parasocial Relationships

When I first think about propaganda, I think of World War II and Soviet posters. However, propaganda is shifting to more digital spaces, including social media platforms and AI technology. For the first episode of the series, I chose to interview my former professor, Dr. Andrew Davis.⁷ This episode is related to social media propaganda and ways we can use our agency to decipher the truth online.

One of my main takeaways is that there are multiple shapes and sizes of propaganda; it does not always require a call to action. Propaganda that requires someone to do something or act is *agitprop* or agitational propaganda. Sometimes propaganda intends to create acceptance in an individual. In this episode, we discuss how music posters as promotional materials can serve as agitational propaganda to make users feel inclined to purchase a new album.

Secondly, propaganda is not a one-time experience; it is constant exposure over the course of your lifetime. That is what makes propaganda so difficult: there is not one way to put an end to it since its roots are so deeply entwined with our culture and upbringing.

Another takeaway is that media are not inherently evil; it is only when users weaponize them that it becomes a concern. This is why policy, education, and analyzing personal consumption habits are extremely important to be an active user. Without our government being held accountable and enforcing regulations on platforms, it will be difficult to filter through propaganda in the media. We can use our own discretion by educating ourselves on what to look out for by analyzing how we interact with the media. It is also worth noting that even if you did not create a piece of propaganda, by sharing and interacting with it, you are just as culpable as the original author; people may associate this propaganda with you and your character.

⁷ <https://communication.appstate.edu/faculty-staff/directory/dr-andrew-davis>

Dr. Davis concluded this episode by providing listeners with a list to keep in mind when they come across questionable content in the media. The list includes authorship, sponsorship, timeliness, citations, research methods, considering writing style, and looking for confirmation from other sources. It would be extremely tedious and time-consuming to use the previous steps on every post you see while scrolling, but he encouraged listeners to use some of the steps on posts that you are considering sharing. If there is questionable content that you are planning to share on your profile or even through a private messenger, do some quick research to make sure that you are not passing along misinformation.

Government, Goals, and The Great Patriotic War

This episode was exciting since I interviewed Dr. Volha Kananovich⁸, my former journalism professor. I mentioned briefly in the episode that it was our first time meeting since the pandemic began as I was in her class virtually through Zoom. I chose Dr. Kananovich specifically, as she was born in Belarus and, at that time, it was under Soviet control. She was exposed to propaganda from a very young age, especially surrounding the Great Patriotic War.⁹ This war served almost as a collective memory for those at the time, sharing glimpses of the history without disclosing the story in its entirety. In the interview, she mentioned how when she was a student, they were told a very selective account of the Great Patriotic War in 1941 when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. This essentially left out vital information so the Soviet government could not be tied to another brutal regime (ie. Germany at the time). Many young men and women, like Dr. Kananovich, have this shared memory of the Soviet Union justifying their involvement as patriotic rather than expressing the severity of the war.

Dr. Kananovich was an exceptional resource to speak with about this subject, as she has both personal and scholarly experience regarding propaganda. She has earned doctorates in economics and communications in the United States and her home country of Belarus. This led me to ask how her work relates to the overarching theme of propaganda. She explained that both of her degrees combine into a piece she is currently working on relating to taxpayers.¹⁰ I found this extremely interesting as she mentioned that taxing is a relationship between the government

⁸ <https://communication.appstate.edu/faculty-staff/directory/dr-volha-kananovich>

⁹ Tumarkin, N. (2003). The great patriotic war as myth and memory. *European Review*, 11(4), 595-611. DOI: [10.1017/S1062798703000504](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798703000504)

¹⁰ Kananovich, V. (2022). Contract partner with no rights: The construction of the taxpayer subject in the Belarusian government press. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*. (Online first.) DOI: [10.1080/14791420.2022.2114601](https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2022.2114601)

and its people, which looks very different depending upon the country you live in. Citizens have to put trust in the government, to ensure they receive something in return for the taxes they pay. I also look forward to reading that work once it is finalized and adding it to her page on the website.

We also touched on the importance of word choice in the viral, digital world. Word choice in the world today is more vital than ever, since it is almost impossible to determine the mood behind words, emojis, or images trending algorithmically at light speed. As the episodes progressed, there was some overlap in content; something that stood out to me the most was the origin of the word *propaganda*. The first episode with Dr. Davis mentioned how public relations was created because propaganda had a negative connotation attached to it and even still, public relations professionals are still being called spin doctors. I thought this tied into the conversation I had with Dr. Kananovich about word choices as this profession lends itself to criticism, especially with the word choices we make.

Recap, Research, and Reflection

This episode was different from the previous two as I was recording by myself on my bedroom floor. However, I wanted a finale episode to not only highlight the interviews, but also recap my four years at Appalachian State University. I wanted to put an emphasis on the fact that this thesis project was not a one-time thing, but it took elements from every course I have taken during my undergraduate degree and compiled it into the final project of my academic career. Additionally, I attended Spring Forward in Walker Hall¹¹, which is an event the Communication Department holds annually as a networking event for alumni and students. Our alumni return back to their alma mater to connect and share career and life advice through a series of panels and a reception for current and graduating students. I attended this event a few days before recording this episode and some of the panelists had similar viewpoints to the ones Dr. Davis, Dr. Kananovich, and I made in these episodes. This experience was heartening and again showed me how everything that I have been learning is interconnected. Many societies—and in particular democratic societies—are working to understand more about propaganda today, and how to effectively navigate it. Communication majors of all kinds are at the forefront of cultivating this knowledge essential to democratic societies which are based on the premise of well-informed, engaged citizens.

Within this episode, I opened up a bit more, especially regarding what I learned from speaking with Dr. Kananovich. I highlighted the important notion of collective memory, as most of our conversation was about the Great Patriotic War, and I used the example of September 11,

¹¹ <https://communication.appstate.edu/events/springforward>

2001 as a connection to America's collective memory. Although I was nine months old at the time, September 11 was something often discussed at home and in school as I grew up. If it wasn't mentioned in the classroom, it was talked about among my family, as we lost very close friends whom we consider family in that tragedy. Through Dr. Kananovich being so willing to share her personal history as a young girl growing up under Soviet control, I felt the need to share an important piece of my own history. We connected compassionately through our different but shared sufferings and experiences.

Conclusion:

I thoroughly enjoyed every step of completing this project and paper. The most rewarding part is seeing how my former professors were so willing to assist in its production even in its earliest stages. Additionally, the Communication Department at Appalachian State University is expansive and professors all do radically different things, sometimes going years without getting the chance to genuinely connect (or so I'm told). So, if all this this project did was to create the opportunity for Dr. Davis and Dr. Kananovich to connect a bit more, in any way, I consider it a success.

I hope that this podcast will continue to grow over my life as it is a topic I am passionate about, and interviewing people outside of the Communication Department could be an interesting comparison and addition to make. Due to a hectic year, it was difficult to find professors to dedicate their time to an interview or professors that were also interested in this topic. I am extremely grateful to all of those individuals who helped me on this project since the beginning, and I am excited to see where this podcast ends up in the next few years.

Finally, this is just a small glimpse of the four years of scholarly work and research I have completed during my undergraduate time at Appalachian State University. I never would have expected my Honors thesis to be a podcast about propaganda, but I could not be more proud of this project. This is more than an assignment but rather a passion project, representing a piece of my final semester in Boone. I have always wanted to start a podcast to share my thoughts and entertain a larger audience, especially after being involved in the performing arts for most of my life. I am extremely grateful for all of the people who believed in me and this podcast enough to contribute their time, energy, and creativity to create a podcast we all can be proud of.

Proposed Topics and Questions for Interviewees:

1. Personal Education

- What was your first interaction with propaganda?

2. History of Propaganda

- How do you feel that it ties into modern days?

3. Where are we headed?

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