



The Anthropology of Propaganda: Threats, Priorities, and Limits

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Abstract

This article contends that propaganda is a growing threat that worsens many of today's most pressing human problems, from political violence to climate denial. Jordan Kiper explains why anthropology is essential for understanding propaganda: it works by manipulating culture, and only ethnographic research can show how it affects real people in real places. The author outlines urgent research priorities, including hate speech, war propaganda, digital authoritarianism, and the impact of AI. Kiper also warns of anthropology's limits and the ethical tensions researchers face. Still, he encourages anthropologists to take a leading role in understanding propaganda as part of the discipline's mission to disseminate anthropological knowledge to address human problems.

The purpose of anthropology is admirable: to advance the understanding of humankind in all its aspects and to disseminate anthropological knowledge to solve human problems. It was born from and maintains a commitment to intradisciplinary research, including archaeological, biological, ethnological, and linguistic. While some anthropological research is categorized as more humanistic than scientific or vice versa, the discipline itself remains united in comprehending what it means to be human. We seek to understand variation, provide detailed ethnographic or site-specific knowledge, and thereby promote tolerance and empathy.

How are we doing when it comes to solving human problems? The number of problems that we could consider at the present moment is admittedly overwhelming. Here, I would like to focus on one problem that is often entangled with the rest: propaganda. In doing so I have three goals in mind. The first is to stress the urgency of addressing the threats of propaganda; the second is to identify problems that prioritize anthropological contributions; and the third is to offer words of caution about the limits of anthropological scholarship.

1. The Threats of Propaganda

Some initial stage setting is necessary for what follows. This ranges from defining propaganda to explaining why it matters for anthropology. The reader familiar with key distinctions in propaganda studies may wish to skip the first subsection below. As with each part of this article, a brief overview is conveyed amid considerable diversity regarding the emboldened topics.

What Is Propaganda?

Propaganda, though a contested term, is understood as the systematic dissemination of information to influence or manipulate public opinion or behavior. It is a form of strategic communication, in particular, that is designed to resonate with a targeted audience. Yet, unlike ethically driven communication, which is transparent and aims for mutual benefit, propaganda is used to move an audience toward an endgame, an outcome envisioned by the propagandist. The end game usually involves an audience believing or behaving in ways that benefit some people while disadvantaging others, if not actively harming a recognizable civilian population. In many cases, the propagandist's own audience is disadvantaged by a propaganda campaign as well, because they serve as the means to an end. Propagandists will therefore attempt to persuade an audience but eventually resort to manipulation techniques, including fallacious reasoning, outright lying, and exploiting an audience's shared knowledge and mental representations.

Critically, propagandists are most effective when they spread false or misleading messages through easily accessible or monopolized forms of public communication technologies such as mass media, marketing, public relations, speechmaking, or posts on social media. When information through these technologies is inaccurate or fallacious but not spread with the apparent intent to mislead or deceive others, it is misinformation. When it is intentionally propagated to mislead, deceive, or spread falsities, it is disinformation. In both cases, propaganda spreads effectively from mind to mind when it conforms to the

shared knowledge and mental representations of an audience. Put another way, misinformation or disinformation propagates only if it coheres with an audience's shared knowledge: their beliefs, values, norms, practices, and their internal models for processing and storing such information about the world.

Why Should Propaganda Matter for Anthropology?

Propaganda cannot function without exploiting culture. Propagandists must enlist misinformation or disinformation into the direction of an audience's established behaviors or beliefs; an act otherwise known as 'canalization.' Canalization involves the propagandist adapting messages to specific (sub)cultures, often by discovering what is accepted or rejected by them and thereby honing in on what arouses people therein to action. If successful, the result is an array of effectuating expressions – catchy explanations, platitudes, slogans, key words, or thought-terminating clichés – that render an audience more likely to condone or participate in some collective behavior. Whatever moves audiences toward the propagandist's endgame, it will get used. Equally, propagandists must diminish the effects of competing information by dominating or monopolizing communication technologies, if not creating echo chambers for the targeted audience. Propagandists also cultivate supplementation: creating sociopolitical conditions in which audiences spread misinformation or disinformation on their own. Supplementation can involve 'fire-hosing' the media landscape, censoring or creating self-censorship through fears of surveillance or publicly shaming, requiring displays of loyalty, and controlling education.

Given this much, we might expect anthropologists to be at the forefront of propaganda studies, but that is rarely the case. To appreciate why, it is helpful to consider the two areas of scholarship that dominate contemporary studies but often exclude detailed accounts of culture. On the one hand, you have the science of macro and micro level patterns of propaganda. Respectively, computational scientists use big data to identify trends in propaganda across media ecosystems at the macro-level, while behavioral and brain scientists use experiments to identify the cognitive mechanisms behind the human susceptibilities to propaganda at the micro-level. On the other hand, you have the social science or humanities of communication, wherein propaganda is

studied as a form of persuasion or a campaign understood retrospectively in shaping a community's collective memory or narratives during a historical period. Research on propaganda-as-communication includes 'culture' but mostly from afar: as a stable space or characteristic to which people are affixed and receive their beliefs and practices. Like the science of macro and micro level patterns, propaganda-as-communication often brackets out culture or describes it as something that defines key characteristics of the people in question, which is then used to explain events, often without ethnographic data.

Of course, the upshot of current scholarship is that we know far more today than previous generations about the general patterns of propaganda. These patterns include how audiences shift with trends online, the cognitive biases behind misbeliefs, and speech that is likely to garner attention for potential regulation. However, the obvious downside for anthropologists is that these patterns are bereft of meaning unless grounded in living and breathing cultures.

To show this, I will criticize my own research. Colleagues and I have repeated a series of experiments on the effects of exposure to different kinds of inciting propaganda, as recognized by international criminal law, among participants across Serbia and the United States. Remarkably, we found that framing intergroup tensions as revenge consistently increased participants' ingroup empathies, meaning that they created solidarity with the ingroup, and lowered their outgroup empathies, increasing distrust of others (Kiper et al. 2020, 2023). But this pattern is empty of meaning without knowledge of the underlying cultures. For instance, through my separate ethnographic fieldwork in Serbia, I observed that 'revenge' varied significantly between community discourses and among interlocutors of different social identities. Where nationalists in more isolated communities talked about revenge as justified political retribution for perceived historical injustices, pro-democracy activists in metropolitan areas discussed revenge as restoring law and order against corrupt politicians. Thus, the ongoing interactions and experiences of people in the dynamic local contexts across Serbia made it difficult for me to see how our experimental findings could explain the complexity of revenge concepts in real-life situations.

My point here is that current scholarship on propaganda is good at identifying general patterns. However, it cannot explain those patterns without

comprehending the meaning of distinct propaganda and its impact on people's lived experiences. And here is where we get to the threats of propaganda, which dovetail with what might be two of the less obvious reasons why anthropological approaches matter.

Why Should Anthropology Matter for Propaganda Studies?

Propaganda is a cultural phenomenon that has not only evolved and proliferated in the twenty-first century but has become entangled with virtually every contemporary problem facing humanity. This entanglement is considerable. Propaganda causes or exacerbates the most critical challenges of our time and, often by design, obstructs efforts to ameliorate them. Consider that propaganda is causally linked to political polarization and growing distrust in democratic institutions (Effron and Helgason 2022), failures to prevent or address human rights violations (Maclean 2022), incitement to mass violence (Kiper 2015), and resistance to public health efforts (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, Landon, and Duan 2024). Propaganda also fosters denialism about the ongoing climate crisis (Guenther 2024), provides key justifications for inequalities and corruption, and is behind attacks on science and education (Stanley 2015). Moreover, it is the mainstay for autocrats whose demagoguery and kleptocratic state repression are contributing to global democratic backsliding (Pomerantsev 2019). If the proverbial clock is ticking on solving any of these human problems, then addressing propaganda is a crucial step.

However, we cannot address propaganda without understanding it in living and breathing cultures – and that requires anthropology. For instance, we cannot know whether propaganda incites violence unless we understand the language *and* culture of both the propagandist(s) and audience, not only at the end game of committing violence but over time leading up to it. Studies of online trends, cognitive experiments, or communication techniques alone cannot provide such knowledge. Likewise, public health campaigns must now tailor their own information to targeted audiences – with knowledge of the dynamic construction and diversity of an audience's culture in real time – otherwise conspiracy theories will continue to thwart health initiatives. I could offer more examples, but for the sake of brevity, I will summarize the main claim. At the very least, integrating extant research with

anthropological approaches is necessary for a holistic understanding of propaganda and effectively mitigating its threats.

2. Priorities for Anthropology

Anthropology is well positioned to provide the qualitative and quantitative evidence to address the threats of propaganda. Such evidence should not only explain the meaning of propaganda within its cultural context but capture the experiences of communities affected by it. Arguably the most critical evidence for addressing threats is showing how propaganda is causally linked to conflict and oppression. This link is best captured by the recent term 'dangerous speech'. Dangerous speech is any expression (speech, text, or image) that increases the risk that an audience will condone or participate in violence or other injustices against members of another group. Ever since the term was coined by Susan Benesch in 2012, a shift in legal studies of propaganda occurred. While this shift has spotlighted open questions for empirical research on dangerous speech and its consequences, few anthropologists have contributed to it.

I will therefore use the term 'dangerous speech' to highlight priorities for anthropological approaches to propaganda, but with two caveats in mind. First, our discipline's commitments to human rights entail that anthropological research should not only examine dangerous speech that causes direct violence, which tends to be the focus of legal studies, but also structural and cultural violence. Second, with reflexive caution about top-down implementations and legitimizing state or political mechanisms, anthropological approaches should entail participatory, locally driven solutions.

It is perhaps best to highlight two sets of priorities for anthropology. The first is what I shall call *contested priorities*: open questions that lack consensus, but anthropologists have nevertheless begun researching. The second is for lack of better words *emerging priorities*: speculative questions that remain entirely open due to their novelty or lack of ethnographic data.

Contested Priorities

Hate Speech has formed the bedrock of research on dangerous speech, including speech that is involved in hate crimes, speech that effectuates criminal activity or threats against others, or harmful expressions against groups based on their identities. Because these

have been considered most by law, there is much on the legal concepts of hate speech but little on the ordinary concepts of hate speech among different cultures or communities of practice. A major thread of anthropological research has thus sought to examine how the gap between legal and ordinary concepts influences language policies, the latter of which are often ethnocentric without considerations of culture. For instance, the legal concepts of hate speech that inform Silicon Valley's models for social media monitoring routinely fail to respond to dangerous speech in local contexts worldwide. Such research illustrates two areas that are critical for anthropological contributions: developing detection mechanisms that are nuanced to local languages and cultures, and investigating the effects of hate speech on various communities.

War propaganda is prohibited under Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) given its role in armed conflicts and mass atrocities crimes, and yet it continues unabated. In a scholarly tradition extending back to the early twentieth century, interdisciplinary research has thoroughly investigated the psychological effects of war propaganda. This robust tradition has contributed much to the popular thesis that intergroup violence is caused by hateful beliefs, but anthropologists have remarkably found little evidence to support it. Specifically, postconflict ethnographies suggest that war propaganda may inform populations about intergroup conflict, but it is rarely a causal factor in violence. Most perpetrators do not act on hatreds but rather contextual dynamics such as group loyalties and pressures from local power holders. Further, existing social bonds with populations targeted for violence are diminished through rituals in violence cadres or participating in forced or gradual acts of violence. If so, there is far more danger in the social production of war, through which propaganda is only one factor, than what previous research outside of anthropology has suggested. Open questions thus concern how propaganda interacts with social structures to allow power holders to maintain control and influence over the circumstances of communities, and how to mitigate these effects.

Speech crimes refer to expressions that are criminalized, such that a propagandist is held accountable for potentially dangerous speech. Though speech crimes vary by country, jurisprudence developed over the last two decades has established legal precedents that extend from the international community to local levels. These precedents include

liabilities for incitement to genocide, instigation of violence, hate speech as persecution, ordering or aiding and abetting crimes, and expressions uniting a joint criminal enterprise. An influential line of research has 'studied up' with legal actors in which ethnographers examined the creation of speech crimes through the detection and prosecution of speech within legal institutions (Clarke 2019; Wilson 2017). This research has demonstrated two primary features about the social practice of regulating speech and its relevance for people's everyday lives. First, legal actors value linguistic expertise but rarely draw upon knowledge of cultures when making decisions about speech crimes; and second, legal proceedings do little to emancipate, if not encourage, local agency in the negotiation of speech crime laws. Continued work in this area is therefore important for addressing important matters in applied legal anthropology, such as how effective speech crimes are at preventing violence, what methods are used to detect speech crimes, and how populations are affected by judicial practices.

Digital authoritarianism is the use of digital technologies by governments to monitor and manipulate populations. Studies of digital authoritarianism, arguably, hold the most promise in understanding how propaganda obstructs efforts to solve contemporary human problems. This is because today's autocrats and authoritarian leaders no longer profit from exercising strict totalitarian methods but rather maintaining kleptocracies, which depend on government-business collusion and state-sponsored organized crime. The latter are only possible in the absence of democracy where unchecked powers and impunities allow for state repression, often increasing the likelihood of widespread human rights violations. Corrupt governments are using digital technologies to censor and restrict access to information, surveil and monitor citizens' activities, conduct disinformation campaigns, and misinform public communications.

A general lesson of this research is that propaganda online has been critical to diminishing the public sphere necessary for democracy and human rights, so much so that it has been dubbed "the anti-human rights machine" (Wilson 2022). Debates these days thus concern how to counter digital authoritarianism and what impacts global online connectivity is having on human consciousness and cooperation. Anthropological research is important for these questions.

Emerging Priorities

AI developments have outpaced current research on propaganda. This knowledge gap dovetails with other unknowns about the potential dangers of AI. Because AI systems are black boxes of deep machine learning and their development is protected by developers, there is little transparency in the rapidly developing technology. This is alarming because the threats of propaganda are likely to grow exponentially with the evolution of AI, with many already on the horizon. They include bias and discrimination in algorithms, personal data extraction and manipulation, AI generated misinformation and disinformation, and deepfakes that are especially dangerous amid rising political divisions and state repression. Hence, a promising line of research is in-depth ethnographic or site-specific investigations of the deployment and impacts of AI.

Economic and environmental violence refers to policies and activities that harm the environment, and by extension human health and well-being. Oftentimes it is marginalized communities who suffer the worst outcomes. Yet little attention is given to this form of violence compared to direct and acute forms of violence such as armed conflicts. With widespread political backlashes to scientific and political efforts to address the worsening climate crisis, economic and environmental violence is likely to increase. Understanding how propaganda is used in its perpetration and translating that information into applied efforts to enact justice are major challenges for anthropology going forward, but one that holds promise for understanding, and perhaps alleviating, global suffering.

Preventing dangerous speech is a priority across disciplines studying propaganda. One branch of this research in sociolegal studies examines counterspeech: the direct responses to harmful speech with the intent to undermine it, usually among users online. The hypothesis behind this work is that well-phrased contradictions to dangerous speech can change people's beliefs or persuade them not to spread violent messages, thereby improving public discourse. While there is promising data concerning counterspeech, its effects seem limited to circumstances among online users in democratic societies. It remains an open question whether counterspeech is effective against digital authoritarian methods and the employment of AI by propagandists intent on harming others. In any event, anthropologists

studying how communities respond to propaganda and diminish its effects – and even finding ways at the local-level to prevent its spread – would provide the best evidence about how to prevent dangerous speech.

3. Facing Up to the Limits of Anthropology

The threats of propaganda and the study thereof pose a common dilemma for anthropologists and expose the limits of anthropological approaches. These are not insurmountable problems. However, they do require care and a strong commitment to our discipline's ethics.

First, the dilemma: one could experience professional vertigo when it comes to balancing research and advocacy. For, if one stays true to cultural relativism, it is difficult to know when to object to misinformation or disinformation during the research process, since doing so could risk imposing one's own epistemologies onto research communities. But if one were not to support communities facing systemic inequalities by calling out propaganda, one could risk becoming complicit in spreading propagation. As with any anthropological research, then, our decisions depend on a particularist ethics that combines our disciplines professional ethics with an engaged commitment to work alongside our research communities for knowledge-building and solving human problems.

Second, the limitations: anthropology is unlikely to fully explain the threats of propaganda on its own. After all, if anthropology prioritizes thick description of local experiences, an ethnographer may not always have the bandwidth to address structures that drive propaganda, such as novel developments in media technologies or the distinct cognitive heuristic behind decision-making. Other disciplines seem better prepared for tracking some phenomena, such as macro and micro level patterns, while anthropology is better suited for ethnographic or site-specific knowledge. Still, anthropology holds the promise for comparing data and offering holistic views, and that makes our discipline so important. When it comes to the threats of propaganda, nothing short of understanding the diversity of living cultures and synthesizing current scholarship will suffice in countering disinformation, misinformation, and other dangerous speech.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I argued for the importance of anthropological approaches to propaganda, because so many human problems – which themselves require urgent solutions – are entangled with propaganda, and propaganda often worsens them. I also argued that the threats of dangerous speech, in particular, inform the contested and emerging priorities for anthropological research. Humanistically, efforts to address propaganda will remain incomplete without deep ethnographic knowledge of human experiences; scientifically, the causes and effects of propaganda will remain unclear without the science of culture. As with so many of today's problems, solutions depend on understanding humankind in all its aspects. For all these reasons, anthropology, including an anthropology of propaganda, is more urgent than ever.

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