

***Towards Conceptual Clarity: Shaping the Research Agenda of  
Propaganda Studies***

by

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Submitted to

Department of Political Science,  
Central European University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Vienna, Austria

2023

## **Author's declaration**

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An earlier version of this work has previously been submitted as coursework for the course Scope and Methods at the Department of Political Science, and certain portions of the thesis are largely based on said submission – this primarily refers to the Abstract (p.3), and the Introduction (p.5-7), as well as smaller elements included in the Theoretical and Conceptual Background (p.8, 9, and 10), Methodology (p.26), and the Conclusion (p.41).

Vienna, 18 September 2023

## Towards Conceptual Clarity: Shaping the Research Agenda of Propaganda Studies

Petra Radić

**Abstract:** In recent years, the role of media in producing dominant social and political narratives has not only been reaffirmed, but also problematized as the main manufacturer of new forms and classifications of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news – all premised and partially explained through the notion of propaganda, and all serving as foundation stones for post-truth politics overall. Considering this, the concept of propaganda is crucial not only for understanding the most relevant issues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (when propaganda itself was initially defined), but also for understanding the contemporary struggles of political reality – such as polarization, democratic backsliding, resurgence of political violence, development of hybrid regimes, and more. However, the perpetual fragmentation of its definition and meaning has significantly limited the scope of potential scientific inquiry in the field – leaving contemporary academia with a myriad of definitions and theories of propaganda that have never been empirically tested, expressed, or even theoretically contextualized within grander political narratives. More importantly, the limited empirical work that has been conducted upon such theoretical foundation suffers from inherent biases and poor scholarly practices precisely because of the unsystematized groundwork of propaganda research. In most cases, the operationalization of *propaganda* in empirical research (and the case selection upon which said operationalization occurs) purely relies on arbitrary choices made by each individual researcher – as there is no alternative structure to follow. This thesis presents a scoping review of the overall field of propaganda studies, with the aim of specifying the outlined issues in scientific approaches to propaganda.

**Keywords:** propaganda, propaganda studies, political communication, concept formation, scoping review

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## 1 Introduction

Contemporary research in political behavior, social movements, democratic backsliding, or any other topic grounded in the idea of mobilizing individuals on premises of ideology has without a doubt become unimaginable without accounting for the role of media – be it mass, or social. Whereas 20<sup>th</sup> century politics continuously interplayed with the media, the political shifts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century undoubtedly reaffirmed the vast power and potential media companies hold. More specifically, their role in producing and perpetuating dominant social and political narratives became one of the central problems in scholarly research throughout the last decade, as the media became contextualized as the source of post-truth politics, the catalyst of populism, and the main manufacturer of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Following the mainstream proliferation of these phenomena, the concept of propaganda re-emerged in active discourse – both as a weaponized term, actively used in political communication, and as a scholarly concept used as a means of explaining post-truth politics and its communicative components.

For this reason, the notion of propaganda has become crucial not only for understanding the most relevant political issues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when propaganda itself was initially defined, but also for understanding the contemporary struggles of political reality. In other words, 21<sup>st</sup> century academics tend to use propaganda as a conceptual pillar upon which further definitions, theories, and empirical hypotheses are built.

However, propaganda itself was never a clear enough concept for empirical operationalization, and the attempt to utilize it in such ways has led to the perpetual fragmentation of its initially vague definition. In other words, the lack of conceptual clarity has made the research of propaganda as a unique phenomenon significantly limited in its scope, and heavily prone to subjective inferences in empirical research. Moreover, it has compromised

the integrity of existing research that built its ideas upon the theories of propaganda as descriptive, explanatory framework.

This thesis aims to shed a light on exactly how the deterioration of this definition came to be – and how vastly proliferated is the ambiguous understanding of propaganda – as well as assess how harmful this ambiguity is in contemporary research (and potentially aim to provide a toolkit for preventing the perpetuation of this issue in future research).

Thus, the premise of this research is not established upon a gap in the literature *per se*, but rather upon the idea that the existing literature fails to produce conceptual clarity, and (somewhat consequentially) that empirical examinations of propaganda both perpetuate the outlined ambiguity and produce research of questionable virtue. In line with this argument, to explicate what ought to be considered a gap in the literature, I will engage with the notion of propaganda on two levels – firstly, its conceptual understanding throughout the last century, and, secondly, the contemporary overview of empirical research, with a particular focus on inconsistencies in the defined research scope. The final step of the research will be bridging the outlined gap in the literature by providing a research agenda for propaganda studies – designed to circumvent aforementioned issue and outline the best approaches for empirically measuring and describing propaganda.

To adequately expand upon, and address the issues outlined here, the first portion of the research will provide an abbreviated overview of theoretical work on propaganda, with a particular focus on how its various definitions measure up to Giovanni Sartori's (1970; 1984; Sartori et al. 1975) criteria for concept formation. The central element within Sartori's work will be the ideas of conceptual stretching and conceptual clarity. Furthermore, based on the engagement with the theoretical works, I will outline a set of hypotheses that serve to guide the empirical research, and will help determine whether propaganda as a concept should indeed be

reexamined, reconceptualized, and better defined – and, more importantly, does the conceptual understanding of propaganda compromise its empirical study.

After assessing this, the second portion of the paper will aim to provide a scoping review of propaganda research within the past 25 years. Said review will solely focus on empirical work and will include an analysis of all articles published in the top 5 journals (according to the SCImago Journal & Country Rank) within the disciplines of political science, as well as communication and media studies – i.e., the two disciplines most focused on conducting propaganda research.

The substantial focus of the review will be outlining how are the theories and definitions of propaganda operationalized in contemporary research (and are they even operationalized, or is propaganda used as a general noun, rather than a concept), how does said operationalization reflect the hypothesized reasons behind conceptual stretching, and which practical research limitations occur based on operationalizing propaganda in this manner.

Finally, I will present the gathered data, discuss the findings inferred from it, assess the validity of the proposed hypotheses based on said findings, and summarize the essential recommendations for further research based on the conducted analysis – comprised with the hope of achieving a greater level of conceptual clarity, and an overall better understanding of propaganda.

## 2 Theoretical and Conceptual Background

To establish the relevance of conceptual clarity for the field of propaganda research, the essential step is to examine the two rudimentary postulates of the research at hand. This means, firstly, providing a review of relevant literature, and engaging with how the question of conceptual clarity has been addressed in existing work (and, thereby, explicating the potential gap in the literature). And, secondly, it entails providing convincing argumentation on why we should even be considering conceptual clarity in this context – i.e., not only explaining why conceptual clarity matters in general, but also outlining the potential consequences of a concept that has been poorly formed or has entered the realm of conceptual stretching.

In this regard, the field of political communication has two relatively dominant factions, with occasional outliers – one representing academics that do not engage in conceptual debates, and, thereby, implicitly (or, in some cases, explicitly) pose propaganda as a clear concept that might perhaps have nuanced interpretations but is overall universally understood (Chadha and Bhat 2021; Rogers 2012; Wang et al. 2011; Zhu and Fu 2023). The other dominant group is the one that does acknowledge conceptual debates, however, they perceive these debates as either a finished process that solely serves to describe how the concept of propaganda developed over time, or they simply treat them as an issue that has already been raised numerous times, but never clearly resolved, thus, reopening that topic might be futile (Benkler, Faris and Hal 2018; Woolley and Guilbeault, 2019; Woolley and Howard 2019). The former point presents a misconception this thesis aims to correct, so it will be addressed in the methodology and the findings of the paper, but the latter point ought to be emphasized before presenting the relevant literature review for the topic at hand.

The first thing that should be fully acknowledged and emphasized regarding the notion of conceptual debates and their value in research is that the issue of conceptual clarity is by no means a new issue for the field of propaganda research. Moreover, it has been explicitly or



implicitly raised by various propaganda scholars, since the period of the 1980s, up until the most recent publications in the field (e.g., Clack and Johnson 2021; Cull et al. 2003; Cunningham 2002; Hobbs 2020; Jowett and O'Donnell 2012). Most of these authors argue that the essential reason behind the perpetuation of the issue is that propaganda does not have a systematic definition in use, thus, whenever researchers aim to engage with it, they necessarily stumble upon definitional debates. Depending on the particular case the researchers are engaging with, they then aim to resolve said debates by expanding or contracting existing definitions to fit their anticipated research agenda, or purely select the definition that most fits their own argument, without providing much justification behind that decision. Whereas this might seemingly resemble the standard approach to conducting research, it does represent an essential nuance of a difference between an inductive and deductive approach to case selection and concept interpretation – meaning that such a selection process might result in biased findings, and restricted misinterpretations of concepts used.

The final subgroup characterized as the facilitators of conceptual confusion are the authors who produce their own definitions of propaganda to settle existing scholarly debates, and, in doing so, produce definitions that seemingly fit the case they are examining, but are not intended to be universal – therefore, they fit the selected case, but are a questionable fit for propaganda itself.

However, the second point related to conceptual clarity in propaganda research is that the works outlined in the previous paragraphs (as well as many others, some of which will be addressed further in this thesis) emphasize the issue of conceptual clarity but do little to resolve it, or even center it in their argumentation. What this means is that the authors fitting this category mostly use the existing conceptual debates to either introduce their own understanding of propaganda (that then requires much less theoretical depth or empirical grounding to persuade the reader), or, they purely address the conceptual debates through a historical

overview of how propaganda developed, and what were the different understandings of the term over time – without necessarily concluding the argument with a set opinion on which definition they agree with, or which one they will be using within their work (e.g., Auerbach 2013; Marlin 2014; Welch 2014; Woolley and Howard, 2019).

Thus, the contribution of this thesis is not solely outlining issues of conceptual clarity once again, but it is rather the strive to firstly, specify what causes the lack of it in propaganda research, then assess how it potentially harms empirical research related to propaganda. Furthermore, by assessing the consequences of the lack of conceptual clarity on empirical propaganda research, an additional contribution of this thesis is also the practical application of Sartori's (1970) argument on conceptual stretching. Considering that Sartori outlines specific ways in which empirical research can be compromised if it is built on poorly conceptualized concepts, or concepts that have been stretched – this thesis operationalizes Sartori's ideas into practical research hypotheses.

In summary, the essential, abbreviated, central argument of this thesis is that contemporary propaganda has reached the stage of conceptual stretching, without ever reaching the stage of universal generalizability – therefore its stunted in both theory and empirics. To substantiate this claim, and empirically test its virtue, two questions need to be addressed: firstly, why do initial definitions of propaganda fail to be systematic in the first place, and, secondly, what are the practical consequences or manifestations of a lack of conceptual clarity in contemporary propaganda research – and, do they really lead to the problems outlined in this paper (i.e., the problems outlined by authors engaging with conceptual literature – Collier and Gerring (2009); Collier, Laporte and Seawright 2021, Gerring (1999) Sartori (1970), Sartori et al. (1975), and others).

To answer these questions, in the next subsection, I define the essential terminology used in this thesis, and then continue by intertwining two argumentation flows – the first one

on how the concept of propaganda developed over time, and the second one on how conceptual stretching harms the clarity, connotative meaning, and overall usefulness of concepts. The combination of argumentation lines in this manner is useful for two reasons: firstly, it simplifies the philosophical and linguistic ideas behind concept formation, and solely frames them in a way that the focus is set on the potential practical harms of poorly developed concepts. Secondly, it allows for a more natural juxtaposition of various approaches to defining propaganda over time, with an insight into how one process further shaped the subsequent process – and why neither of them led to universal generalizability.

The aim of said subsection is to outline that regardless of how prominent the issue of conceptual clarity is across the discipline of comparative political science, or social science overall – within propaganda research, it becomes a larger, more troubling condition. As noted, this emphasis will include an underlying theoretical foundation based primarily on Sartori's work on conceptual stretching (with some contribution by Gerring, Collier and other prominent authors in the field). After exemplifying the symptoms of conceptual stretching within propaganda research, I will continue to construct a series of testable hypotheses for the empirical portion of this thesis. The empirical chapter, then, addresses the second outlined question – i.e., the question of practical consequences for empirical research.

## **2.1 Essential terminology**

The three essential concepts that will be continuously reappearing within this thesis are propaganda, conceptual clarity, and conceptual stretching. Considering that the understanding of these terms is crucial for following the outlined argument and making sense of the presented data (as well as the hypotheses that the data is addressing), I will firstly emphasize what my understanding of these terms is, and how they are contextualized within this piece.

**Propaganda** – the rough definition of propaganda that is somewhat present across a variety of works on the concept states that it is a “more or less systematic effort to manipulate other people’s beliefs, attitudes, or actions by means of symbols (words, gestures, banners, monuments, music, clothing, insignia, hairstyles, designs on coins and postage stamps, and so forth).” (Smith, 2023). This definition is not a direct iteration of Harold Lasswell’s one, but it is primarily grounded in his work – as Lasswell uniquely emphasizes the use of symbols in propaganda (1927, 1938), and the element of psychological manipulation (as cited in Ellul 1973, p.11-12).

Content-wise, this definition does comprise the rough understanding of propaganda that is shared both by scholars, and by the general population (which both Gerring and Sartori emphasize is crucial for good concept formation), however, three crucial things are worth noting in order to understand why the conceptual debates still arise around this. Firstly, despite this definition comprising the rough understanding of propaganda that is widely acknowledged – its specific understanding, as well as the caveats of this definition are widely contested. To briefly exemplify (as this will be expanded upon in the next subsection) – some authors contest the notion of sheer “manipulation” and argue that propaganda is necessarily and strictly manipulation of mass character (Bernays, 1928). Others take this a step further and use it as an essential difference between propaganda and persuasion (Jowett, and O'Donnell, V. 2012; Welch 2014). Moreover, some argue that propaganda does not necessarily have to be “manipulative”, and it could simply openly and systematically target citizens (Privavola, 1988), in some cases being direct and blunt enough that the audiences can (and do) choose to opt out of it (Knight and Tribin, 2019). This contestation leads to the second important point to note – which is the potential for overlapping of definitions and conceptual understandings. Continuing with the examples provided, Britannica (adapting the work of Gass and Seiter, 2011) defines persuasion as “the process by which a person’s attitudes or behavior are, without duress,

influenced by communications from other people” – which seemingly fits the definition of propaganda as well. Furthermore, if we dive deeper into the contestations of “manipulation” as an essential element of propaganda, we might end up with a definition that roughly suggests influencing people’ beliefs, attitudes, and actions by means of symbols – which is more-or-less an essential definition of communication (Gordon 2023; Ogden and Richards 1989; Theodorson and Theodorson 1969; Yakin and Totu, 2014 and more). Thus, the third, and final point to emphasize – whereas the rough definition provided here gives the reader a general understanding of propaganda, the subsequent criticism of the definition provides a perfect example of what conceptual unclarity or conceptual stretching both have to do with the concept. Put simply, even if we agree that there is a rough definition and rough understanding of what propaganda is – we would most likely fail to encompass the entirety of objects that we know as propaganda within that definition. And precisely this discrepancy between the reality we aim to characterize, and the language we use to do so is the essence of concept formation.

**Conceptual clarity** – despite not being often used in concept formation literature (or even being rejected by Gerring for being an oversimplification), the term “conceptual clarity” seems to perfectly fit the aim of this thesis, precisely because it is simple, direct, and encompasses a variety of concept formation problems at play. The essential meaning of conceptual clarity usually refers to theoretical clarity related to the concept at hand and describes a state at which a concept is universally generalizable, clear, properly aligned, fits the required criteria, can be easily operationalized and much more (Collier and Levitsky 1997, Gerring 1999, Sartori 1984). Many authors have proposed extensive guidelines, rules, and recommendations for both concept formation, and reconceptualization – aimed at achieving conceptual clarity, and avoiding issues of conceptual travelling, stretching, mismatch, and more

(e.g., Collier and Gerring 2009; Collier and Mahon 1993; Collier, LaPorte and Seawright 2002, Gerring 1999; Munck and Verkuilen 2002).

However, as the primary goal of this thesis is to emphasize the scope of conceptual stretching in contemporary propaganda research and delineate its consequences on empirical work in the field, I will not unpack the aforementioned recommendations, rules, and similar. Put simply, the goal of this thesis is to assess has conceptual stretching occurred with the concept of propaganda, and to what extent – once that assessment has been made, future research ought to examine how it could be mended. Thus, conceptual clarity will be referenced as an ideal to strive towards, and its postulates will be further addressed at the end of the thesis, in the section on future research.

**Conceptual stretching** – the main understanding of conceptual stretching in this thesis refers to Sartori's (1970, 1975) interpretation of the term. According to his work, conceptual stretching is a loss of connotative precision and an attribution of vagueness that happens when concepts are applied outside of their primary meanings. More specifically, when concepts are extracted from their primary context, they become more vague, less generalizable, (drastically) less specific, and significantly less useful in empirical research. Conceptual stretching is usually a result of changes in political thought, or the expansion of political research into new geographical areas – when academics attempt to use familiar terms to describe something that might resemble a phenomenon they have previously encountered, but it is not an exact fit. Due to the lack of an exact fit, the concepts become slightly morphed, in the attempt to fit a particular case, and, over time, either lose their connotative meaning, or develop a variety of connotative meanings – making the concept less universally generalizable. In an abbreviated manner, Sartori describes that conceptual stretching primarily stems from incorrect climbing of the ladder of abstraction.

Within this thesis, I am arguing that the concept of propaganda has been repeatedly stretched because of two reasons – firstly, the conceptualizations that continuously disregard the geopolitical context that is described, and, secondly, the conceptualizations that actively strive to broaden the understanding of propaganda in order to encompass newly emerging phenomena.

The first reason refers to practices of using “propaganda” as the exact same concept for the forms of mass manipulation that are occurring in contemporary USA, contemporary China, Nazi Germany, USSR, or 1950s US, with no specifications of political regimes in given times and spaces, their relationships to media outlets, the relationship of audience to media outlets in that context, and much more. Additionally, the second reason refers to the historical tendencies of propaganda continuously adapting to technological innovation, and a changing geopolitical landscape. In other words, the concept was used to label advertising and marketing strategies that proliferated with the invention of television and radio, to characterize media manipulation that occurred during the world wars, encompass information warfare that started developing at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is currently used to describe the proliferation of fake-news, computational manipulation of algorithms, and a portion of social media effects on audiences.

The essential virtue of this argument is the premise that even if we assume that propaganda was a universally generalizable concept at some point, the continuous conceptual stretching has made it endlessly difficult to operationalize in a comparative manner.

## **2.2 The history of conceptual stretching**

As outlined earlier, a crucial assumption about conceptual stretching is that it occurs when stable, well-defined concepts are incorrectly maneuvered on the ladder of abstraction. Sartori proposes a rule for climbing and descending the ladder that entails making a concept more abstract by lessening its attributes and properties, and making it less abstract by including

more (Sartori, 1970). When scholars appropriate concepts in a way that diverges from this rule - especially when they apply the concepts to newly emerging phenomena, or geopolitical contexts that have not previously been studied – the initial understanding of the concept’s meaning starts deteriorating.

However, as noted beforehand, this thesis has two aims – to test whether or not propaganda has reached conceptual stretching in the empirical portion of the paper, and to argue that it has indeed never been a fully stable, well-defined concept in this theoretical section. In other words, the main assumption of this paper is that propaganda has been an unstable concept that has further deteriorated due to conceptual stretching – and in order for conceptual clarity to be achieved, reconceptualization needs to occur. This scoping review serves as a foundation for a detailed examination of the field, and its findings can be used precisely for the purposes of reconceptualizing propaganda.

The assumption that propaganda has never been a well-defined, universally generalizable concept is backed by the aforementioned definitional debates that have been following the concept since its initial proliferation into academia in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Doob 1935; Henderson 1943; Lasswell 1927). Some authors go as far as claiming that the concept is in its nature distorted (Pomerantsev 2014, 2019), whereas others argue that its definitions are so unspecific and unrelated to its essential meaning, that it necessarily becomes reconstructed in every new piece of academic work (Cunningham 2002).

A point that is not often used in argumentation but has been briefly mentioned earlier in this paper is the idea that the definition of propaganda (and, thereby, the closest thing to its conceptualization) continuously changed throughout its history. Moreover, it changed in the precise patterns that Sartori outlines as potential pitfalls for conceptual stretching (1970).

The essential example for the scope of conceptual stretching, that is often overlooked, despite being relatively obvious is how propaganda became initially conceptualized under the



operations of the Catholic Church – within the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013, Welch 2014). From there it developed into the field of political communication, but its essential meaning has radically changed in the meantime. Thus, the initial iteration of propaganda, and the rough understanding of it that we contemporarily use are radically different concepts – meaning that as soon as propaganda was encompassed, understood, and described in academic terms, it had already faced conceptual stretching.

Within the following period, dominated by Bernays (1928) and Lasswell (1938), the conceptualization of propaganda followed Freud's psychoanalytical teaching, and put a substantive emphasis on propaganda as a way of swaying public opinion and manipulating the masses. Both authors solely worked from and aimed to describe the American context and understanding of propaganda, and both put a heavy emphasis on the role of mass media in producing and promoting it. Moreover, the role of advertising and marketing were seen as crucial components for understanding propaganda – and its overall interpretation continuously assumed operations within a free-market, sales-oriented, capitalist environment. Besides Bernays and Lasswell, a handful of other prominent authors aimed to examine propaganda as well – and they all followed the approach outlined within this paragraph (e.g., Doob (1935) and Henderson (1943). These definitions manifested a variety of characteristics Sartori posed as essential for conceptual stretching – they were broad, vague, consistently overlapping with other phenomena like marketing, advertising, or even entertainment or media consumption, they were ambiguous, semantically overloaded, and quite weak in their analytical potential.

Despite this, said interpretation of propaganda remained dominant up until the Cold War – the nature of the Cold War necessarily brought the understanding of propaganda into question, and initiated a reconceptualization of the term. The most prolific author from this period was Jacques Ellul – whose approach to propaganda yet again serves as a testament to continuous conceptual stretching. Ellul (1954, 1973) approached propaganda from a sociological

standpoint and aimed to morph the concept into a comprehensive theory. What differentiated Ellul's approach from those of previous authors was the simultaneous strive to not only define propaganda, but to expand its scope into the realm of "technological society". Put simply, Ellul spent a good portion of his career constructing a sociological theory that would encompass the technological revolution the world was living through – and propaganda was yet another concept that needed to be broadened in order to fit the scope. Thus, Ellul seemingly continues what Bernays and Lasswell started, but expands the understanding of propaganda into a completely new domain of technology – a domain that is not only large and relevant but is actively growing in both regards. Much like in the period of Bernays and Laswell, propaganda conceptually still overlapped with marketing, advertising, and PR, and its effects were still radically oversimplified and consistently interlinked with behaviors such as sheer media consumption. The dominant theories of the time, like the hypodermic needle theory were empirically unfounded, and theoretically relied on the premise of passive audiences that simply intake the information that is presented to them, without the ability to question it, reject it, or maneuver away from it (Croteau and Hoynes 1997; Lowery and DeFleur 1995). Thus, not only was propaganda conceptually ambiguous and unclear, but the technological revolution it now encompassed seemed to facilitate these patterns of media consumption – necessarily resulting in brainwashing of the audiences. So it was difficult to discern exactly what propaganda was, as most mass media consumption seemed to fit the criteria of exposure to propaganda.

Similarly, a contemporary form of conceptual stretching depending on the geopolitical context is the adaptation of the Herman-Chomsky propaganda model (initially construed in the 1980s) to fit the emerging threats of terrorism after 9/11. Essentially, the main contribution of the propaganda model was the outlining of "filters" that play a crucial role in deciding which news gets published, and which does not. One of the five presented filters had been "anti-communism" – a filter that reflected the contemporary mindset of the American society very

well. However, following 9/11, the filter of “anti-communism” changed into “counterterrorism”. In other words, the Herman-Chomsky propaganda model that is an essential component of the contemporary understanding of propaganda simply shifted one of its central tenants to better fit the political needs of the American society (Chomsky and Herman, 2002; Lang and Lang 2004). This shift attests to both the instability of the concept, and its ambiguity, as the changing of one of its central components did little to obscure the meaning of propaganda – pointing to the fact that selecting attributes that do/do not fit the scope of propaganda is practically irrelevant. More importantly, the sheer presence and vast virtue of ideology (be it communist or terrorist) as a deeply interlinked term to propaganda shows yet another piece of evidence for conceptual stretching. Not only has the encompassing of all things political changed the overall understanding of propaganda, but its deep reliance and rootedness in mass media once again severely expanded what was known about the concept, and how the concept was understood.

Finally, the most contemporary example of defining propaganda and broadening its scope can be found in Jowett and O'Donnell's work “Propaganda and persuasion” (2012). The two authors, as already mentioned, acknowledge conceptual broadness and unclarity – and work on specifying it and narrowing down the meaning of propaganda, however, the series of cases they analyze, and examples they use reaffirms the conceptual ambiguity of the term. A good example to both clarify and substantiate this point is that one of the central goals of the book is to differentiate propaganda from persuasion, but at the same time, it presents the first bit of work that systematically and openly expands the concept of propaganda into the realm of information warfare and political campaigning. Thereby, the arguments provided might help clear up some former debates, but the concept of propaganda is yet again broadened to fit two substantively large forms of political communication.

Overall, besides this brief overview of how the most prolific and essential theorists of propaganda directly contributed to conceptual stretching, the entire history of the term seems to actively perpetuate the same pattern over and over again – with Bernays (1928) openly asserting that propaganda is a synonym for public relations and marketing, many asserting that propaganda is essentially nothing more than persuasion (Meirick, 2002; Kwak et al. 2021), or simply an alternative means of explaining political campaigning, a crucial component of all big information and technological revolutions (Ellul 1954; 1972), from the proliferation of mass media to the development of post-truth social media platforms (Anstead 2021), a tool for facilitating political communication in times of crises and world wars (Jowett and O'Donnell 2012; Thomas and Bond, 2015), all the way to contemporary propaganda as a way of explaining computational strategies, AI misuse, social media effects, etc. (Clack and Johnson 2021; Howard, Woolley and Calo, 2018; Woolley and Howard 2019).

In summary, what this means is that the essential requirements that propaganda continuously fails to fulfill in order for it to be universally recognizable and conceptually clear are, firstly, to have a somewhat standardized, univocal and clear consensus over its meaning in the natural language, secondly, to have a stable meaning-to-word semantic continuum (Sartori 2009), or, similarly, to have the term A correspond to the object B, to have internal consistency, and, thirdly, to have a parsimony of descriptive attributes (Gerring 1999). These three components seem to change with every aforementioned instance of conceptual stretching, and until they are reached it is highly unlikely that propaganda will indeed be a universally generalizable concept. What this means in practical terms is that if one were to list all forms of behavior that we consider propaganda and attempt to construct a definition from that subset of cases, the task would be practically impossible. We have expanded the concept of propaganda so much that the practical ability to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions of propaganda, as a way of describing its essential attributes has become unimaginably difficult.

## 2.3 Hypotheses

Based on the outlined theories, this research has two central hypotheses: H1 propaganda has become a more important topic in the field of political science and media and communication research, and H2 the definition of propaganda has become broader over time. The essential point of these hypotheses is to assess whether propaganda has indeed faced conceptual stretching, and how broad are the potential implications of that.

The first hypothesis asserts that propaganda is more prominent, more present, and more noteworthy in contemporary research – which, if proven, serves as a solid basis for the argument that the scope of influence of conceptual stretching might be quite broad. Additionally, if H2 is proven as well, the combination of these two hypotheses serves as a foundation for inference on conceptual stretching.

Considering that both of these hypotheses are relatively wide in their scope, both have been simplified into several hypotheses with a much narrower focus.

**H1: Propaganda has become a more important topic in the field of political science and media and communication research.**

**H1.1: There has been an increase in the number of published academic works relating to propaganda within the past years.**

**H1.2: Over time, propaganda has more often been one of the central concepts in academic articles.**

H1.1 examines the sole presence of propaganda-oriented articles in the publications examined, with an expectation of relative growth over time, whereas H1.2 examines the presence of propaganda as the central/one of the central concepts in said articles (again, expecting relative growth over time). If both H1.1 and H1.2 are confirmed, it would mean that propaganda is a

topic that is growing in popularity over time (i.e., more publications), and is growing in relevance. Thereby, if both hypotheses are confirmed, we can infer that propaganda is becoming a more important topic overall.

**H2: The definition of propaganda has become broader over time.**

**H2.1: The definition of propaganda has over time become interlinked with a greater number of other concepts.**

**H2.2: In most academic work, propaganda is a term used as a general noun, without a specific context or contextual meaning provided.**

**H2.3: The number of articles explicitly defining propaganda is decreasing over time.**

**H2.4: When empirically examining propaganda at a low level of abstraction (in a very specific context), academics rely on similar definitions of propaganda, regardless of the context they are studying.**

H2.1 is aimed at assessing how interconnected the idea of propaganda became to other concepts within political communication. The purpose of this hypothesis is to implicitly assess conceptual stretching in the capacity of adapting the initial concept to new phenomena within the political reality. Precisely because the primary goal is to assess the potential and extent of conceptual stretching, the concepts coded are all concepts relevant for political communication that are seemingly becoming more and more connected to propaganda. Confirming H2.1 would provide a solid foundation for suspecting the possibility of conceptual stretching – considering that conceptual stretching includes the stretching of a concept onto other concepts, and the subsequent loss of a part of its meaning or the clarity of its meaning, H2.1 basically has the potential to confirm half of the theory. The other half could arguably then be confirmed by

H2.2, as it aims to examine the deterioration of propaganda and a disregard for its contextual meaning. In other words, if propaganda is used as a general noun across various contexts, without those contexts being acknowledged or used for a better, more precise interpretation of a specific case of propaganda – that would provide more evidence in favor of conceptual stretching.

H2.3 and H2.4 are posed to give a more nuanced interpretation of conceptual stretching – posing that if conceptual stretching is indeed happening (H2.1 and H2.2), there is a possibility that a false sense of universal generalizability is emerging (H2.3), as well as a possibility that the lines between levels of abstraction are being explicitly blurred (H2.4).

Put simply, if confirmed, H2.1 and H2.2 on their own confirm H2, and, thereby, confirm that conceptual stretching is indeed occurring. Additionally, if H2.3 and H2.4 are confirmed as well, we have strong evidence for conceptual stretching, as well as evidence for specific harms of conceptual stretching outlined in Sartori's work.

### 3 Methodology

The format and method selected for this thesis is the scoping review – a relatively underrepresented format in political science that is nonetheless quite present in many hard sciences (Maggio et al. 2021) and is occasionally useful for social science research as well (Raitskaya and Tikhonova, 2019).

A scoping review is in its nature an exploratory, descriptive approach aiming to assess and characterize the research framework surrounding a particular idea, concept, or field. It normally entails comprehensive research of all published work relevant for a particular area of research, and is in that sense very similar to formats like systematic reviews or meta-analyses, which are more familiar to political scientists (Doucouliagos, H., & Ulubaşoğlu 2008; Amsalem and Zoizner, 2023).

What makes the scoping review different from these two is that its principal goal is to outline the scope of a particular research area – in other words, a scoping review aims to reassess how much we know about a particular idea, how clear are the concepts used within this area, how relevant is the body of literature related to it – and which literature gaps remain unaddressed (Munn et al. 2018). In other words, a scoping review examines the entirety of published work related to a specific topic, with the goal of clarifying and organizing said field of interest.

Precisely for this reason, a scoping review is a better fit for areas of research that are somewhat unstandardized, as it can serve as a starting point for reassessing the research needs of a particular topic, or, alternatively, can be a precursor to a systematic review, or be useful in assessing the compatibility of various forms of data for a meta-analysis.

Considering that one of the central arguments made within this thesis is that the state of propaganda research is suffering due to a lack of conceptual clarity – a scoping review presents a good way of both testing that hypothesis and providing a further insight into the context and



circumstances within which conceptual clarity (or the lack of conceptual clarity) transpires. In other words, regardless of whether or not it confirms the main hypothesis of this paper, a scoping review will undoubtedly help create a foundation to standardize and organize the existing scope of propaganda research, as it will necessarily clarify both the taxonomy of propaganda, and its conceptual interpretation within the context of contemporary political science.

Additionally, besides solely outlining the scope of existing research, a scoping review is fitting as it can provide an in-depth insight into what the existing research has done, and what it has not – and, by that, help outline gaps in the literature, and provide an empirical foundation for outlining a future research agenda for the subject at hand.

Finally, as stated in the literature review, it has become clear to everyone consuming political communication literature that propaganda is making a “comeback” in academia – being more and more often associated with computational manipulation of algorithms, media capture in hybrid regimes and backsliding democracies, new strategies of political campaigning, new forms of information warfare and much more (e.g., Abrahms and Potter 2015; Kuai et al. 2022; Mercer 2013). For this reason, it is fair to assume that the concept of propaganda is not only reemerging, but is also inherently changing, as its principal understanding actively broadens to encompass the emerging phenomena within political communication. Thus, an additional benefit of this approach is that besides examining propaganda as a static concept, it opens the possibility of tracing precisely how the understanding of propaganda potentially changed throughout the past 20 years.

### **3.1 Data Collection**

In order to produce a relevant and comprehensive scoping review for propaganda research, I first narrowed the scope of publications to scientific journals in the field of political

science and communication and media research, and proceeded to select and analyze all articles that included the word “propaganda” anywhere in the text. The temporal scope included publications from the year 2000 to the year 2023<sup>1</sup>.

Journal articles were chosen over books, edited volumes, and similar other scientific publications for five main reasons: firstly, they are a vital component of scientific research, secondly, as they are published at the quickest pace (compared to other scholarly contributions), they are the most likely to reflect ongoing change in academic practices, thirdly, they are the most universally accessible form of academic publication, fourthly, in most cases they depict empirical work – meaning that they necessarily allow for observations on the relationship between theory and empirics in propaganda research, and, finally, they rely on a system of peer reviews, therefore, as soon as an article is published it is also implicitly recognized, and appreciated by the academic community.

Furthermore, the scope was limited to the top 5 journals according to the SCImago Journal & Country Rank within the disciplines of political science, as well as communication and media studies. These disciplines were selected as the disciplines that most focus on conducting propaganda research. History as a discipline, although rich with propaganda research, has been excluded from the study, as its focus is the sole understanding of how propaganda was utilized, without engaging with the questions of what propaganda is, and how it works – or does it, in fact work. In other words, the work of historians in most cases assumes what propaganda is, and further assumes that it necessarily works, meaning that this research,

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<sup>1</sup> Data collection was performed in the first half of 2023 (April), so the full scope of publications in 2023 is not included in the research – most articles published a portion of their 2023 publications online (not the entirety of their intended publications), but some published no articles at the point at which the data was collected (e.g., International Organizations, Communication Research, Journal of Advertising). The data for 2023 was nonetheless included in the analysis, as it presents a useful and very current insight, and missing 2023 data did not present an issue for data analysis. The only case within which it mattered is noted further in the thesis.

although very valuable, does not engage with the questions essential for concept formation. Additionally, the fields of behavioral science, cognitive psychology, and linguistics were also considered, but were excluded after analyzing preliminary data, as the journals rarely included articles on propaganda – and even when they did, propaganda was mostly mentioned in passing, without being relevant for the overall piece.

Thus, the final data was comprised of 413 articles published across 10 journals - Communication Methods and Measures, Communication Research, Digital Journalism, Journal of Advertising, Political Communication, American Journal of Political Science, American Political Science Review, British Journal of Political Science, International Organization, and Political Analysis.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1**

<b>Journal</b>	<b>Number of articles</b>
American Journal of Political Science	36
American Political Science Review	71
British Journal of Political Science	41
Communication Methods and Measures	5
Communication Research	12
Digital Journalism	87
International Organization	47
Journal of Advertising	17
Political Analysis	8
Political Communication	89

The final step was creating a codebook that included basic information on the article, an overview of how the term “propaganda” was used, and how it was directly

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<sup>2</sup> 90 units of analysis were excluded before reaching the final number of 413 – these were excluded as they were not original academic articles (e.g., they were reviews, afterwards, article covers, etc.).

defined/referenced in the article, how important propaganda was contextually for the article, which concepts seemed to relate to the concept of propaganda and was propaganda a component of empirical research in each given piece. These categories were constructed with two goals in mind: firstly, to test the hypotheses explicated earlier in this thesis, and, secondly, to gather a broad insight into propaganda research, in order to produce an adequate scoping review of the field.

Certain elements of the codebook were added after the initial data analysis (e.g., is propaganda used synonymously with the term “persuasion”, is propaganda used in relation to the concept of “terrorism”, etc.), as these seemed to form a pattern that was worthy of being observed in a manner that could be replicated in future research. In other words, after the new categories were added, the articles that were already coded were once again coded for that particular added element.

Finally, within the coding category 18 (Propaganda is used for a particular societal context (i.e.) country), it is important to note that Global North countries were defined according to the classification provided by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Additionally, within the historical context, the definition aimed to follow the contextual implications of the classification – therefore colonial powers were coded as “Global North”, and non-colonial countries (also communist countries at the time) were coded as “Global South”.

### **3.2 Data Analysis**

Most of the coding framework categorized data into binary categories, allowing for a simpler process of data analysis. For the most part, this meant establishing simple correlations between the examined variables and the passage of time – i.e., the primary goal (both in the hypotheses

and the overall scoping review) was noting emerging patterns. The regression tables for the correlations examined are all reported in the Appendix.

The second portion of the analysis (used for examining authors referenced, and countries specified for the context within which propaganda occurs, i.e., coding categories 9, 10, 11, and 18) relied on basic text analysis. In other words, the goal of this portion of the analysis was to account for the frequency of use of specific terms – specifically, names of countries or authors. The results of these analyses are reported in the Appendix (Table 4) as well as in the findings for hypothesis H2.4.

## 4 Findings

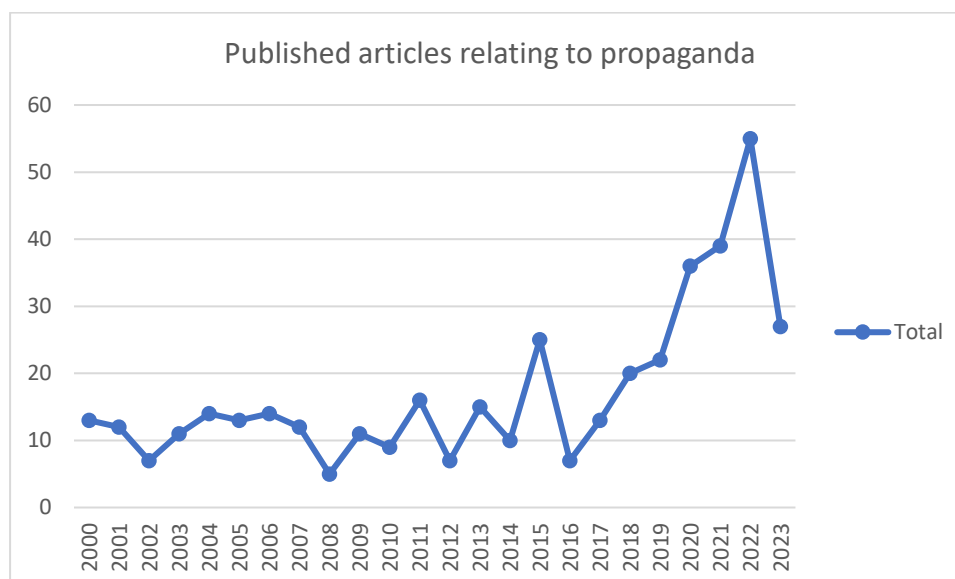
The following chapter will be structured in such a way that each of the hypotheses will be followed by corresponding data visualization (if applicable), and a subsequent unpacking of the findings represented. After discussing the findings that corresponded to the research hypotheses, I will present certain bits of data that fell outside of the scope of the hypothesized portion of the paper, but are still valuable as elements of a scoping review.

### 4.1 Hypothesized data

H1: Propaganda has become a more important topic in the field of political science and media and communication research.

H1.1: There has been an increase in the number of published academic works relating to propaganda within the past years.

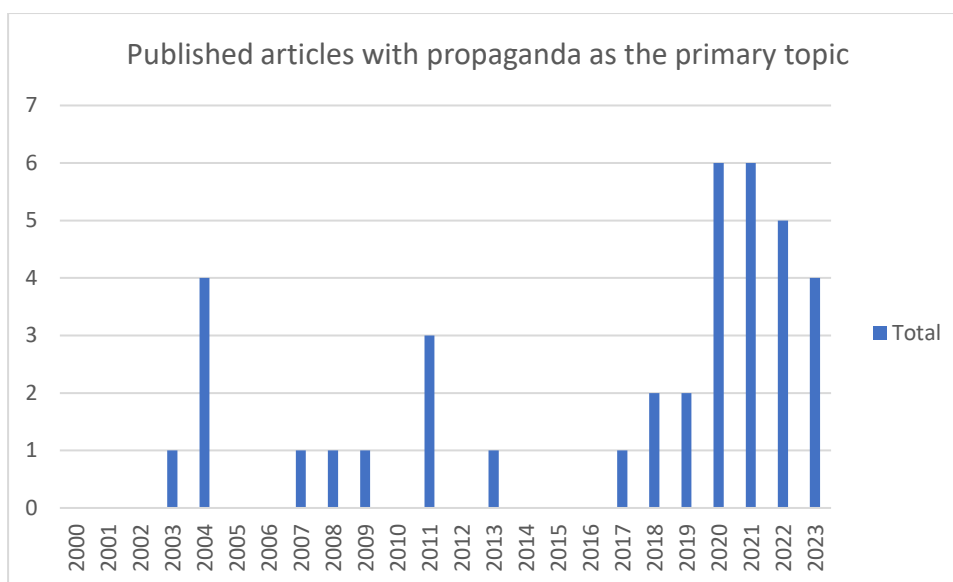
**Figure 1:** Total number of published articles relating to propaganda per year.



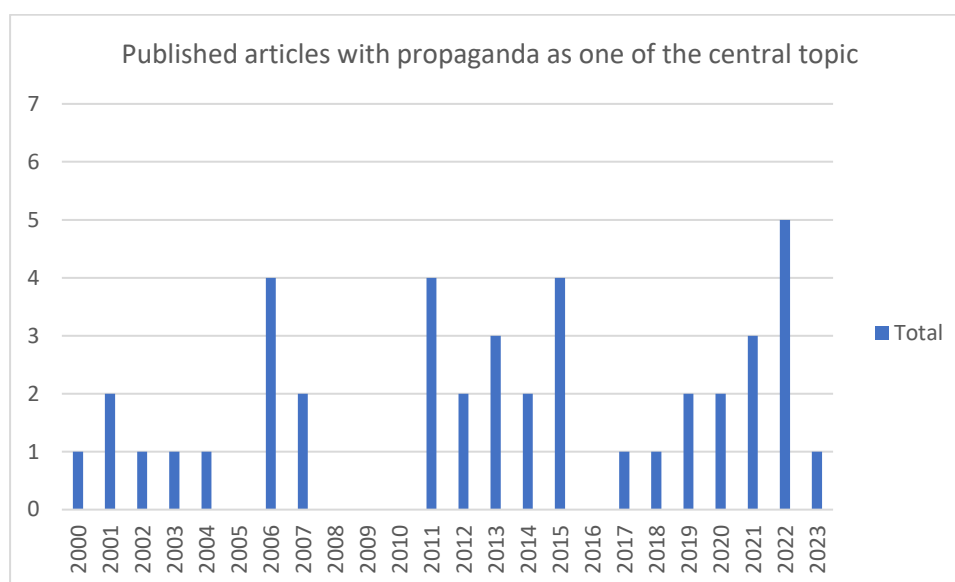
As seen in Figure 1, and substantiated in Table 1 (Appendix), there is a statistically significant positive relationship between the variables studied – i.e., there is an increase in the number of published articles relating to propaganda over time. Additionally, the decrease in number of cases for 2023 is most likely explained by the aforementioned timing of the data collection, i.e., the fact that the data was collected within the first half of 2023, and the studied articles had only published a portion of the intended work for 2023 overall. Despite this decrease, the regression still confirms the hypothesis – meaning that if reexamined after all the 2023 articles were published, the relationship could only strengthen. H1.1 is, therefore, confirmed.

H1.2: Over time, propaganda has more often been one of the central concepts in academic articles.

**Figure 2:** Total number of published articles with propaganda as their primary topic.



**Figure 3:** Number of published articles with propaganda as one of the central topics.



For H1.2, the results shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3 point to a relative increase in the number of articles that deal with propaganda either as the primary topic, or one of the central topics covered, but the stronger piece of evidence is without a doubt found in Table 2 (Appendix). For the purposes of running the regression contained in Table 2, the dependent variable was averaged out between the value of published articles with propaganda as the primary topic, and the values of published articles with propaganda as one of the central topics, and the results once again substantiated a statistically significant positive relationship, meaning that H1.2 was also confirmed.

Thus, with both H1.1 and H1.2 being confirmed, we can infer that H1 (as contextualized earlier in this piece) is also confirmed – i.e., the data shows that propaganda has indeed become a more important topic in the field of political science and media and communication research. A slight discrepancy in the data that is worth noting, and potentially addressing in further research (especially if focusing on conceptual clarity) is that the increase in the number of articles related to propaganda is much larger and more significant than the increase in the number of articles that relate to propaganda as one of the central topics. What this basically

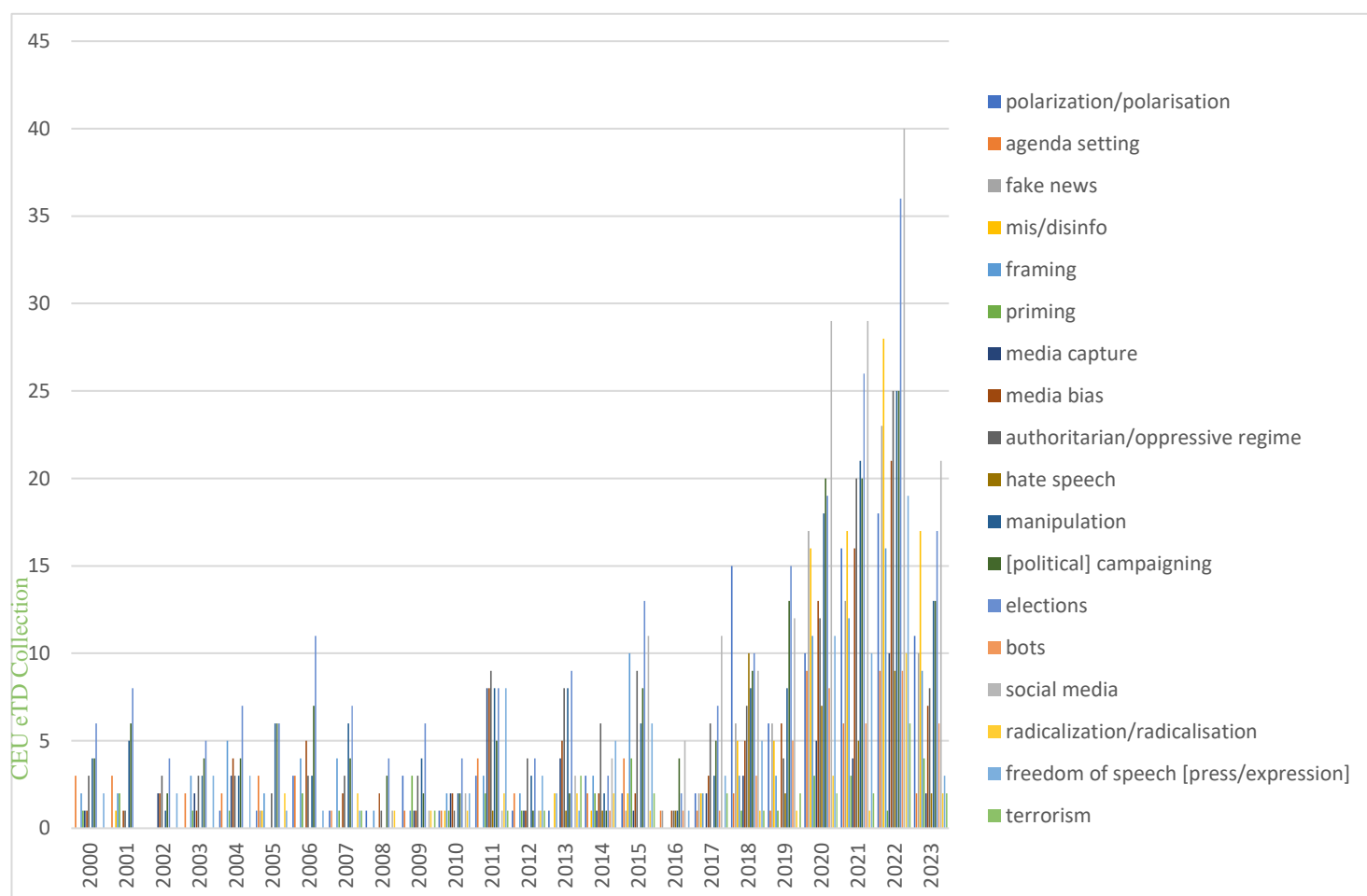


means is that more people tend to write about propaganda than focus in on it – which has the potential to lead to the previously outlined issue of unpacking new concepts by using propaganda as one of the conceptual crutches upon which new meaning is created.

H2: The definition of propaganda has become broader over time.

H2.1: The definition of propaganda has over time become interlinked with a greater number of other concepts.

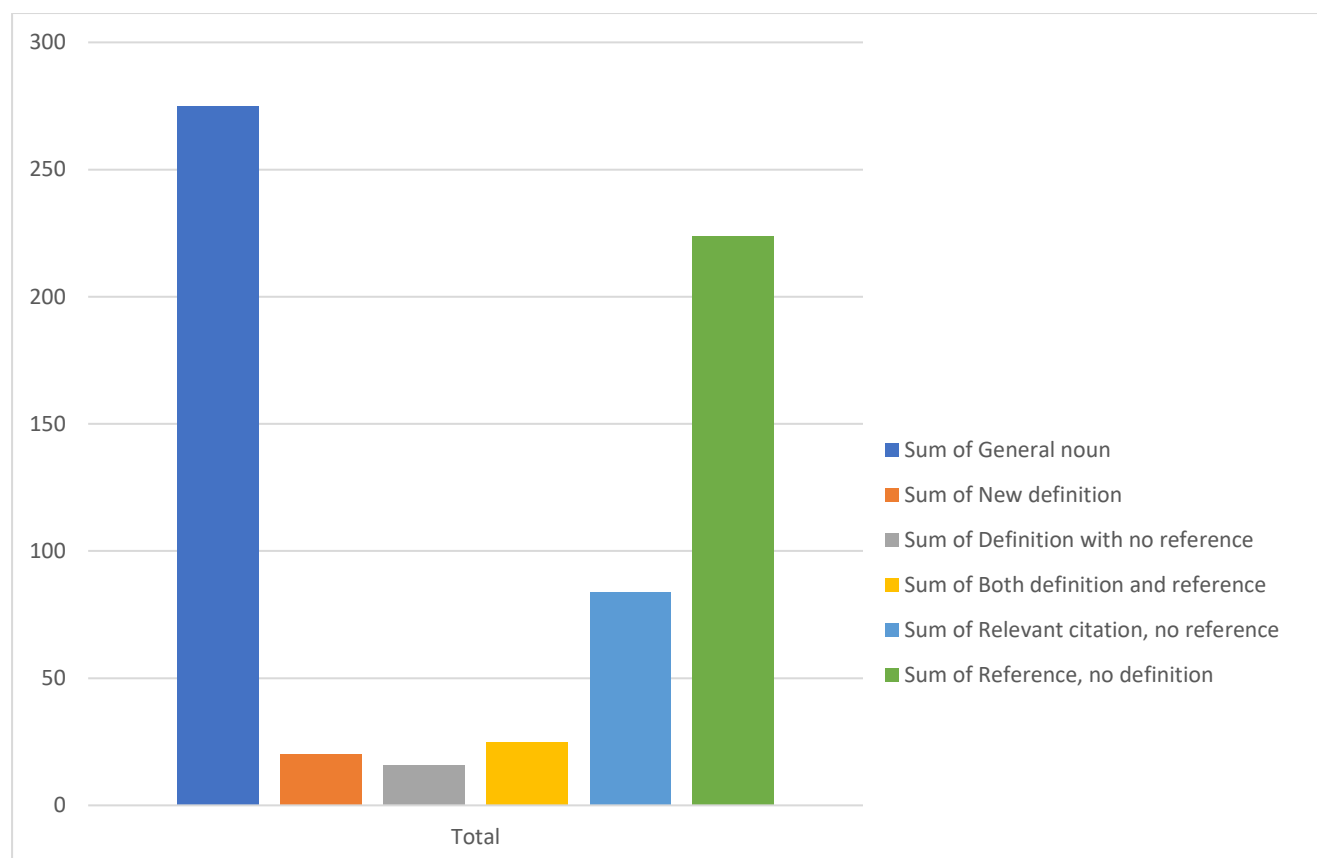
**Figure 4:** The frequency of concepts interlinked with propaganda appearing in studied articles.



H2.1 is confirmed without a doubt – both by the figure above, and by Table 3 (Appendix). Table 3 (differently from other regression tables in this paper) is a multiple linear regression model within which the combined effect of all outlined concepts was used as a dependent variable. Additionally, both Table 3 and Figure 4 are arguably the strongest empirical evidence for conceptual stretching, as they demonstrate the biggest increase in the presence of those interlinked concepts that are freshly emerging – e.g., social media, or fake news – both repeatedly contextualized in a manner that ties their conceptualization to both the conceptualization, and the meaning of propaganda.

H2.2: In most academic work, propaganda is a term used as a general noun, without a specific context or contextual meaning provided.

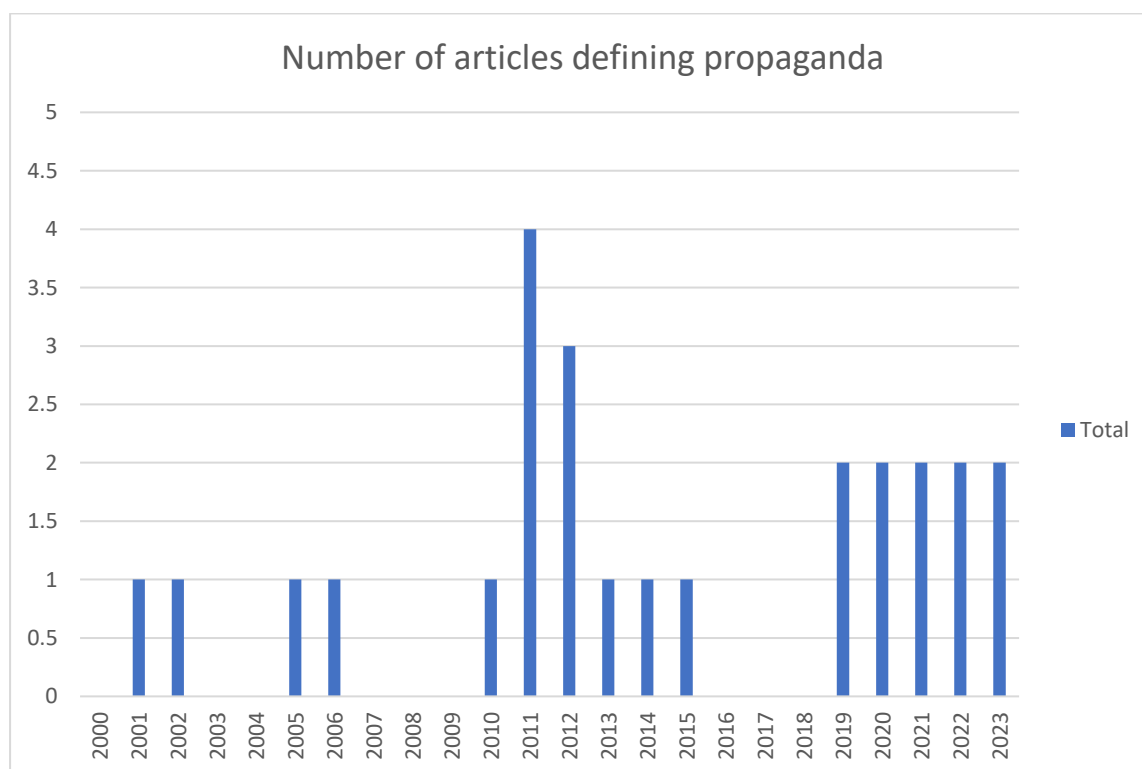
**Figure 5:** Chart of frequencies relating to the basic use of the term propaganda, its definition and references.



H2.2 is also confirmed, as demonstrated in Figure 5, as most articles do indeed use the term propaganda solely and simply as a general noun. Additionally, the second most represented field is “Reference, no definition” – which, as established earlier on, includes a simple reference after the term “propaganda” is mentioned. However, this reference is not contextualized or unpacked, meaning that the articles that do include such a reference do not necessarily specify if they are working with the exact definition listed in the used reference – and, often times, the work referenced does not include a definition of propaganda itself.

H2.3: The number of articles explicitly defining propaganda is decreasing over time.

**Figure 6:** Chart denoting the number of articles that explicitly define propaganda.



H2.3 is the first hypothesis that has been rejected by the data. As Figure 6 shows, the number of articles that explicitly define propaganda seems to be relatively constant over time, with peaks in 2011 and 2012. Additionally, as seen in Table 4, the regression analysis concludes that there is a slight positive trend, but it is not statistically significant, therefore, it should not be interpreted as a finding on its own. Furthermore, considering how low the number of articles that do explicitly define propaganda is (regardless of whether or not there is a positive trend), it is baseless to assume that the number of articles explicitly defining propaganda would decrease. However, as noted earlier, in establishing the research hypotheses, the rejection of H2.3 does not necessarily lead to the rejection of H2 overall – especially if we examine and unpack the data presented here. Considering that H2 poses that the definition of propaganda is becoming broader over time, and, therefore, H2.3 assumes that precisely because of scholars working with broad, relatively vague definitions, the practice of specifying and explicitly defining propaganda would decrease – there is a potential that a sample from 2000 is already “late” when it comes to conceptual stretching. In other words, considering that most of the data varies from 0 to 2 articles per year explicitly defining propaganda, perhaps the trend has already plateaued before the year 2000. This is, again, something that ought to be addressed and examined in further research.

H2.4: When empirically examining propaganda at a low level of abstraction (in a very specific context), academics rely on similar definitions of propaganda, regardless of the context they are studying.

Similarly to H2.3, H2.4 should be rejected as well, since the textual analysis did not find a significant amount of similar references used in the articles examined. However, the sample gathered to test this hypothesis is also quite small. Only 38 articles out of the entire data set

empirically engaged with propaganda in a very specific context, most of which overlapped in the context they were examining (i.e., most articles were examining propaganda in China, and another very large subset focused solely on the US). Thus, relying on work from the same context is not only expected, but encouraged – and does not contribute to assessing H2.4 hypothesis. There were only three cases of definitions being shared across contexts that the text analysis detected – which was too few to provide a useful insight.

Considering that H2.1 and H2.2 were strongly confirmed, and H2.3 and H2.4 strongly rejected, H2 ought to nominally be rejected as well. The main reason behind rejecting H2 is not necessarily that the data is going against the theorized expectations relating to conceptual stretching, but mostly because of how the hypotheses were set up and interconnected. E.g., H2.4 is a hypothesis that is poorly phrased and underperformed in the realistic anticipation of the data – therefore, it would be wise to replicate the testing of H2 with more specific, more grounded hypotheses.

However, as noted in outlining the hypothesis, the confirmation of H2.1 and H2.2 on their own is sufficient to confirm that conceptual stretching is indeed occurring, but the confirmation of H2.3 and H2.4 would result in strong evidence for conceptual stretching, as well as evidence for specific harms of conceptual stretching outlined in Sartori's work.

## **4.2 Scoping data**

In terms of findings that were not used for hypotheses testing, two relevant findings should be emphasized to contribute to the production of a scoping review – and potentially inspire further research in the field.

The first interesting finding is that the research of the Global North and the Global South seems to be very proportionately represented in propaganda research – and this seems to continuously hold true for the overall timespan covered by the analysis. Out of 222 articles that

studied propaganda in a given context, 118 articles examined the countries of the Global South, and 112 examined countries of the Global North (several articles included both). This is an interesting finding as it is somewhat counterintuitive to similar insights in other realms of political science. However, despite this, when examining individual studied countries, the comprehensive perspective seems to disappear. In simple terms, propaganda research seems to be primarily concerned with historically recognized propaganda powers – namely, China, United States of America, Russia and Germany (primarily Nazi Germany, not contemporary Germany). Furthermore, a lot of contextualized research of propaganda is primarily concerned with terrorist organizations – but, within such studies, propaganda is occasionally framed as national rather than terrorist (e.g., Syrian or Palestinian propaganda is a term used for specific organizations within Syria or Palestine).

The second interesting finding that is worth noting is that about 10% of the articles contained in the dataset included propaganda in their empirical research as either a variable or an element of their results (or, in a few cases, both). Many of these used propaganda as a general noun or used references that were not fully unpacked or presented in the context of the article. This is interesting for two reasons: firstly, within the scope of this paper, the operationalization of propaganda in empirical research is an important element that could help clarify the issues of conceptual stretching. Secondly, in the general context of a scoping review – this is interesting, as no patterns of empirical understanding of propaganda emerged during the study. What this means is that the process of operationalizing propaganda in empirical research seems to be fully unstandardized – and should, thus, be further examined and adequately understood.

### **4.3 Recommendations for future research**

As emphasized, one of the biggest benefits and essential reasons for producing a scoping review is assessing the scope of research within a given field and using the findings to shape future

research and organize an established understanding of what we do know about a given topic, and what we do not.

A central point made within this thesis is that the concept of propaganda has most likely faced conceptual stretching, and has, on top of that, been continuously questioned and misunderstood. Thus, the first and central recommendation for future research is the necessity to reconceptualize propaganda, or, at least, encourage systematic practices of explicating studied meaning (as set forth by Sartori 1970; 1984 and Gerring 1999) until the concept is either reevaluated, or universally discredited precisely for the lack of its overarching, shared meaning. In practical terms, this means encouraging authors to actively explicate and step-by-step narrate their understanding and approach to propaganda, when dealing with the concept.

Secondly, as this thesis found strong, but not undeniable evidence for conceptual stretching, further research should seek to verify and/or clarify said results. A potentially constructive approach could be utilizing the data set gathered for the purposes of this study and examining the consistency between referenced authors, and the contextualization of propaganda in the works they have been cited in. Alternatively, examining the portion of articles that have an explicit definition of propaganda within them, and assessing how these definitions relate to the rules, recommendations and guidelines of concept formation (i.e., my scoping review compared articles with definitions to those without, those with references to those without, those unpacking the concept of propaganda to those not unpacking it, etc. – however, it did not examine the concept itself and the way it has been presented – and this presents yet another very important step in assessing concept formation and conceptual clarity).

Thirdly, as already emphasized earlier, the process of operationalizing propaganda in empirical research seems to be fully unstandardized, and, for that reason, heavily prone to subjective inferences. What this means in practical terms is that there is firstly, a discrepancy between the concept of propaganda and the reality of propaganda, and, secondly, a discrepancy

between the concept of propaganda, and the practical examples of propaganda that scholars aim to study. In order to avoid subjective inferences (primarily) in case selection, and the decision-making on what is and what is not propaganda, scholars should spend more time on clarifying what specific set of attributes they are working with when using the definition of propaganda.

Fourthly, encouraging similar research practices relating to solely the empirical research of propaganda would help clarify the aforementioned points. Practically speaking, developing a way of assessing exactly how propaganda has been operationalized, how cases have been selected, is there a conceptual understanding of the term that is being used in academic research, are the selected cases a good fit for the conceptual framework, and so on. I.e., producing a similar piece of work to this thesis, but with a primary focus on how authors operationalizing propaganda decide what they classify as propaganda within a particular study.

Fifthly, encouraging similar research practices to producing scoping reviews within social sciences overall – primarily in the domains that are potentially clouded and require a reassessment.

And finally, the two points I have already outlined in the previous subsection that relate more to the content of the research, rather than the concept itself – encouraging research in terrorist propaganda, and aiming to differentiate national propaganda from terrorist propaganda, as well as differentiate acts of propaganda from act of terror. Additionally, expanding the geopolitical empirical scope and examining countries that are underrepresented in contemporary propaganda research.



## 5 Conclusion

This paper aimed to produce a scoping review of propaganda literature in the period between the year 2000 and 2023 to address the issue of conceptual clarity in propaganda research. On top of relying on the scoping review as its essential empirical foundation, the paper also provided a theoretical overview of conceptual stretching as the main underlying issue behind the lack of conceptual clarity.

In simple terms, this research was built on the idea that the existing literature fails to produce conceptual clarity, and (somewhat consequentially) that empirical examinations of propaganda both perpetuate the outlined ambiguity and produce research of questionable virtue. The argument on literature firstly relied on a theoretical conjecture that exemplified how the history of propaganda has in actuality been a history of conceptual stretching that repeatedly aimed to broaden the scope of what was considered propaganda – and thereby compromised the essential meaning behind the term itself.

Secondly, the empirical argument relied on the scoping review of propaganda research, i.e., a contemporary overview of empirical research, with a particular focus on inconsistencies in the defined research scope. The review gathered data on various important elements of propaganda research that could potentially be at fault for a lack of conceptual clarity and has provided an insight into how detrimental the lack of conceptual clarity indeed is for propaganda research.

The essential findings of the theoretical chapter presented a serious framework for understanding the potential detrimental effects of conceptual stretching, but, more importantly, the empirical portion of the thesis substantiated this further. The two central hypotheses of the research were (for the most part) confirmed – H1: “propaganda has become a more important topic in the field of political science and media and communication research” being fully

confirmed by the presented data, and H2: “the definition of propaganda has become broader over time” being partially confirmed by the data.

In order to confirm H1, both of the following hypotheses were confirmed as well: H1.1: There has been an increase in the number of published academic works relating to propaganda within the past years; H1.2: Over time, propaganda has more often been one of the central concepts in academic articles.

In the case of H2 the following hypotheses were confirmed: H2.1: The definition of propaganda has over time become interlinked with a greater number of other concepts, and H2.2: In most academic work, propaganda is a term used as a general noun, without a specific context or contextual meaning provided.

These two narrower hypotheses served to prove the existence of the premise of conceptual stretching, therefore, by being confirmed within this thesis, we can argue that conceptual stretching has not only been present in the historical development of propaganda, but is still vastly present and prolific in the empirical domain of political communication.

The two hypotheses that were rejected by the data were posed to give a more nuanced interpretation of conceptual stretching – posing that if conceptual stretching is indeed happening (H2.1 and H2.2), there is a possibility that a false sense of universal generalizability is emerging (H2.3), as well as a possibility that the lines between levels of abstraction are being explicitly blurred (H2.4). Considering that these two were rejected, we do not possess an insight into the nuances of conceptual stretching and the extent to which it is influencing contemporary empirical work, however, we can still confirm that conceptual stretching is present.

Thus, the two most significant contributions presented in this thesis are firstly, the confirmation that conceptual stretching is indeed present in contemporary propaganda research, and that it can potentially result in the harms and pitfalls outlined in the literature on concept formation. Secondly, a contribution of this thesis is also scoping review of the field of

propaganda research that serves to both attest to conceptual stretching, but also outline other interesting patterns that should be observed and addressed – like the lack of a unified empirical approach to propaganda, or a blurred conceptualization of terrorist propaganda at times and similar.

## 6 Appendix A – Coding Framework

### BASIC INFORMATION

1. Ref
2. Year
3. Journal
4. Article
5. DOI

### BASIC USE OF TERM AND REFERENCES

6. **The author(s) use *propaganda* as a general noun** → They provide no definition, citation, explanation, context, and similar
7. **The author(s) provide a new definition of *propaganda***
  - The definition is based on empirical findings
  - The definition is based on a combination of previous theoretical work/other working definitions
8. **The author(s) provide a definition of *propaganda* without a reference**
  - The definition is not presented as a contribution in the piece, but rather as “general knowledge”, so it lacks a reference to the origins of said definition
9. **The author(s) do not provide a definition of *propaganda*, but use a reference for the term itself**
  - Who is cited?
  - The term is not necessarily fully operationalized, or contextualized with reference to the cited work, but a citation is included when the term is used
10. **The author(s) provide a definition of *propaganda* and a reference for the definition**
  - Who is cited?
11. **The author(s) do not introduce the term *propaganda* in the article, but reference ideas from works that primarily deal with propaganda** → no use of the word in the text, but the presence of the word in references
  - Who is cited?

**ADDED 12.1** – the authors use the term propaganda synonymously to the term persuasion

**ADDED 12.2** – the authors introduce propaganda as a concept that has been empirically disproven

### CONTEXT OF THE ARTICLE

12. **The analyzed piece primarily deals with the topic of *propaganda* → propaganda is the central concept of the piece**
- Does the piece engage with propaganda on a theoretical level
  - Does the piece engage with propaganda on an empirical level
13. ***Propaganda* plays a very important role in the analyzed piece → propaganda is one of various central concepts of the piece**
- Does the piece engage with propaganda on a theoretical level
  - Does the piece engage with propaganda on an empirical level
14. **The analyzed piece contextualizes *propaganda* as a way of clarifying a central concept of the paper → propaganda is not a central concept of the paper, but is an essential component to explaining the central concept of the article**
15. ***Propaganda* is mentioned only once/a handful of times and is not relevant for the overall article**
16. ***Propaganda* is contextualized as a potential threat that should be accounted for (in future research)**

#### INTERLINKED CONCEPTS

17. The term propaganda is used in reference to the following:
- Fake news
  - Misinformation/disinformation
  - Agenda setting
  - Framing
  - Priming
  - Media capture
  - Media bias
  - Authoritarian/oppressive regimes
  - Polarization (polarisation)
  - Hate speech
  - Manipulation
  - [Political] campaigning
  - Elections
  - Bots

- Social media platforms
- Radicalization (radicalisation)
- Freedom of speech [of press/of expression]
- **ADDED:** Terrorism

18. Propaganda is used for a particular societal context (i.e.) country

- Is it a country in Global North
- If a country is specified – which country

#### EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

19. Is propaganda a component of a variable measured?

20. Is propaganda a component of the results?

## 7 Appendix B – Data Summary

**Table 1** – summary of all articles, definitions/conceptualization of propaganda

Total number	General noun	New definition	Def and ref	Def no reference	No def, yes ref
413	275	20	25	16	224

**Table 2** – summary of all articles, importance of propaganda in the article

Total number	Primary topic	Essential topic	Not central, but important	Not important
413	38	42	63	264

**Table 3** – summary of all articles, interlinked concepts present in over 30% of articles

Total number	elections	social media	campaigning	manipulation	authoritarian regime
413	237	180	170	161	145

**Table 4** – summary of all articles, geopolitical context of propaganda

Total number of articles	Context	Global North	Global South
413	222	112	118

**Table 5** – summary of all articles, geopolitical context of propaganda by country

Context articles	China	USA	Russia	Third Reich
222	44	37	17	9

**Table 6** – summary of all articles, propaganda in empirical research

Total number of articles	Variable	Results
413	57	56

## 8 Appendix C – Regression Tables

**Table 1** – regression table for H1.1: There has been an increase in the number of published academic works relating to propaganda within the past years.

	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	-2219.055	538.7072	-4.119	0.000451***
Year	1.1117	0.2678	4.151	0.000417***
Residual Std. Error	9.082			
Multiple R-squared	0.4392			
Adjusted R-squared	0.4137			
F-statistic	17.23			
p-value	0.0004			



**Table 2** - regression table for H1.2: Over time, propaganda has more often been one of the central concepts in academic articles.

	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	-453.190	140.878	-3.217	0.00397**
Year	0.227	0.070	3.241	0.00375**
Residual Std. Error	2.375			
Multiple R-squared	0.3231			
Adjusted R-squared	0.2923			
F-statistic	10.5			
p-value	0.0038			

**Table 3** - regression table for H2.1: The definition of propaganda has over time become interlinked with a greater number of other concepts.

	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	-16189.25	3380.81	-4.789	8.80e-05 ***
Year	8.085	1.681	4.810	8.35e-05 ***
Residual Std. Error	57			
Multiple R-squared	0.5126			
Adjusted R-squared	0.4905			
F-statistic	23.14			
p-value	8.349e-05			

**Table 4** – regression table for H2.3: The number of articles explicitly defining propaganda is decreasing over time.

	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	- 118.774	60.488	- 1.964	0.0623
Year	0.0596	0.0301	1.981	0.0603
Residual Std. Error	1.02			
Multiple R-squared	0.1514			
Adjusted R-squared	0.1128			
F-statistic	3.924			
p-value	0.0603			

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