

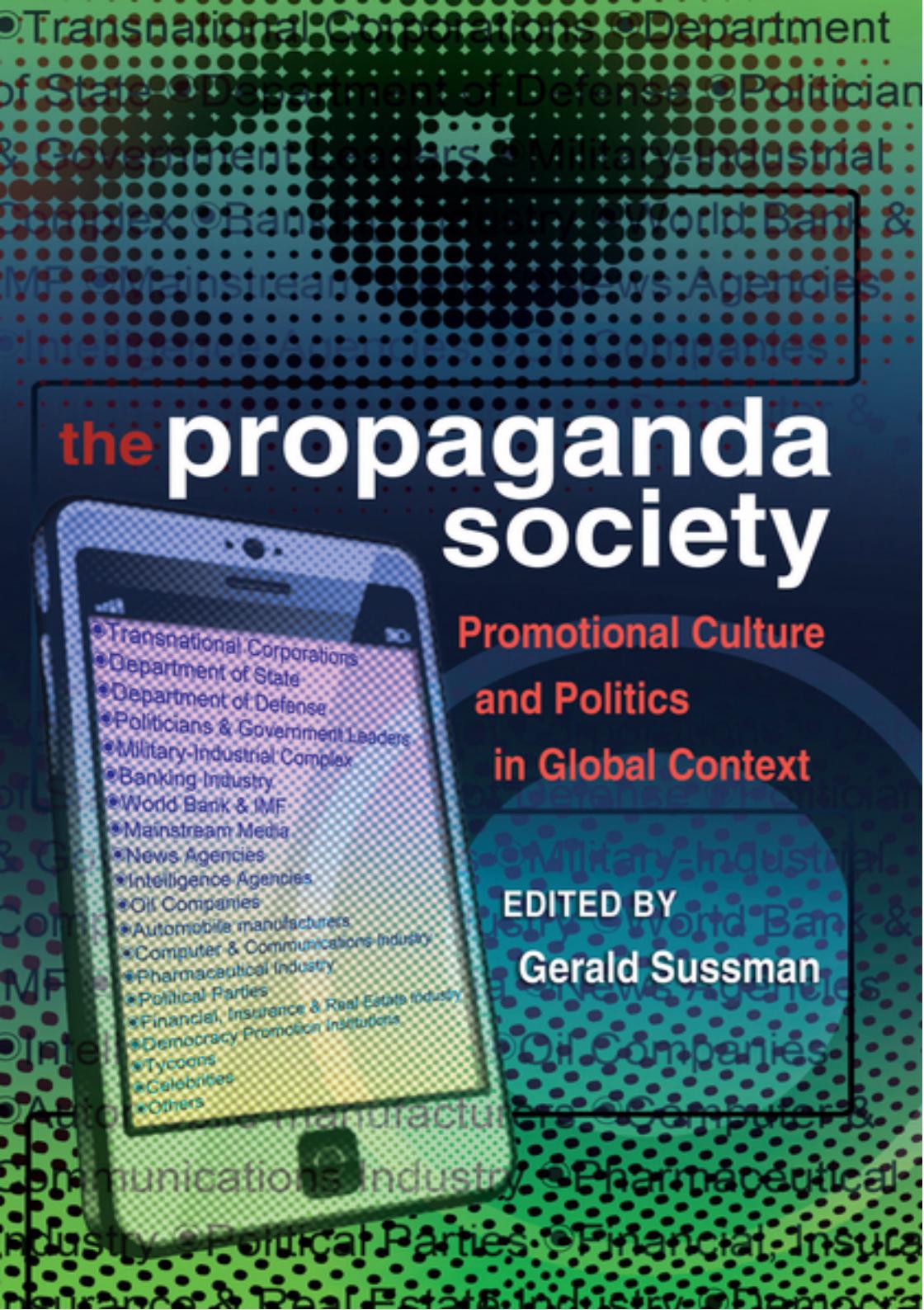
the propaganda society

Promotional Culture
and Politics

in Global Context

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- Politicians & Government Leaders
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- Democracy Promotion Institutions
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- Celebrities
- Others



1. *Introduction*

The Propaganda Society

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The spectacle, grasped in its totality, is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life.

—Guy Debord (1977)

What I wish to do in this introduction to *The Propaganda Society* is to analyze some of the main tendencies that have encouraged a profusion of promotion and propaganda in liberal (i.e., market) democracies, with specific reference to the United States. To begin with, *propaganda* refers to highly organized doctrinal texts communicated throughout the sound and visual media in the service of state and corporate interests (and aspiring elites), and *promotion* means the regular employment of advertising, marketing, direct marketing, public relations (PR), and other selling initiatives on behalf of both elites and non-elites by those trained as active promotional and self-promotional agents. The studies in this volume are focused on leading liberal democracies, whose political structure can be characterized as what William Robinson (1996) calls *polyarchy*—a state nominally democratic in form but ruled by competing plutocratic interests founded on property-based constitutional and legal codes,

well-organized social management practices, and institutions for fostering state legitimacy.

I start with the relationship of propaganda to political economy, neoliberalism, and politics and proceed to a discussion of propaganda and promotion in work life, foreign policy, and mass media. I conclude with some reflections on the marxian concept of reification and how that idea helps us to understand the relationships of communication to corporate capitalism within a transnational economic (global) context.

Propaganda has been constitutive of the West's power discourse for centuries. Its etymology is traced to the Latin *propagare* (to propagate, to sow matters of faith), and its meaning has been associated with the ideological management of society ever since, primarily through political and religious doctrines that their respective wielders have sought to inculcate for the maintenance of state and ecclesiastical authority. With the rise of the modern bourgeoisie, propaganda functions were taken up by an additional set of agencies, namely those engaged in the promotion of commodity culture and politics. The advent of digital media and communication technologies in the post-Second World War era, assisted by regulatory, organizational, and economic structural adaptations, has opened fresh and vast opportunities for amplifying political and commercial texts, images, and doctrines. Embedded within a transnational economic, technological, political, military, and institutional regime of power, contemporary promotional culture is tied together through a network of *systemic propaganda*, which has encouraged the migration and penetration of communications to every branch of society, from the selling of foreign policy initiatives to the self-promotional virtual presence of Facebook.

The difference between traditional and systemic propaganda is that the former was typically employed in the service of *specific* policy or project outcomes, whereas the latter derives from a generalized and globalized strategy of development and its underlying neoliberal political economy and technological infrastructure. One can date the transition to systemic propaganda to the era of “deindustrialization” and flexible accumulation, starting in the 1970s. With its greater emphasis on individuated consumption, the neoliberal era is marked by increased investments in cultural production and the proliferation of signs (Goldman, 1992) that permeate every sphere of society. Propaganda is now intrinsic to the state's mode of economic, political, and cultural (re)production.

In the neoliberal transition, the gradual dismemberment of the welfare state, and the decline of civic life, the leading industrial economies in the West,

employing an advanced digital system and infrastructure of production, have promoted a greater cultural identity with corporate brands and prescriptions for social interaction, that is, a *corporate state*. Looking mainly in this chapter at the U.S. experience in such a political degeneration, it is quite clear that reduced government protection of citizens and regulatory oversight have led to a broader onslaught of deregulation, which has permitted greater corporate expansion and concentration, encouraged the flight of domestic industries to more desperate Third World locales, and loosened traditional moral restrictions on businesses and professional and political associates in their engagement with public institutions, including the mainstream media, religious bodies, the universities, the courts, the military and police, and legislative and executive government.

Following Baudrillard, Mark Poster argues that the concept of “public” has morphed into “publicity,” while questions about “character” have been superseded by concerns about “image” (Poster, 2001, p. 78). One result of a shrinking public sphere is that we now see cruder political commentary in the media and in the U.S. Congress than anyone alive has ever previously witnessed, churches have become capitalist enterprises, with ownership of or location in shopping malls (e.g., Mormons in Salt Lake, Gateway megachurch in Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex, Church of England in Britain), and financial houses have taken debt financing, home mortgages, and workers’ pensions to the casino. In the mainstream media, television executives shamelessly produce cheaply constructed, raunchy, voyeuristic “reality” shows to dumb down adolescents while pushing consumerist ideology on yet younger children. At the same time, broadcast news stations make their sponsors, their parent networks, and media-produced celebrities the focus of what’s happening in the world. Liz Moor (2008) has written:

Marketing and branding techniques are now applied to charities, cities, government departments and policy initiatives. In many cases, this is linked to the neo-liberal tendency to emphasise the withdrawal of the state agencies from elements of social provision and to replace them by various non-governmental and ‘third sector’ organisations.

In the formal sphere of politics, national election campaigns, already spending billions of dollars and escalating the costs with each election cycle, end up as coarse, visceral, and deceptive TV political advertising by and for corporate interests. In an early 2010 ruling by the Supreme Court, clearly motivated by neoliberal core values, restraints on corporate spending on political propaganda were effectively lifted. No politician going up against the juggernaut of cor-

porate power can expect to win the image war against such concentrated and coordinated power. If the flood of corporate propaganda were not enough, there now exist “search engine optimization companies” (SEOs) whose expertise is, for the right price, burying damaging news reports on corporations and politicians by inundating Google with favorable propaganda about their clients, so no one will find them. Try searching for a critical article on SEOs, and you’ll probably expire before succeeding.

The Democratic Party is no less solicitous of corporate executive favor than the Republicans, rendering the fallacy of the “two-party” system more transparent than ever. In a money-driven, winner-take-all political system in which most federal-level senators and “representatives” are hundreds of times wealthier than their average constituents, this should come as no surprise. For citizens concerned about equality and social justice, the practical choices in voting typically are about as meaningful as a drink menu offering only Coke and Pepsi. In such a weakened state of democracy, it becomes all the more important for the two parties (more like two factions of a single party) to carry on “culture wars” and other image battles in order to create the illusion of a genuine political contest and a concern for the public interest.

With the emergence of the twin forces of economic liberalization and technological transformation in the late 1970s, “futurologists” predicted the coming of a benign form of user-friendly capitalism, and some (such as John Naisbitt & Patricia Aburdene, 1990) even pondered, come the new millennium, what Americans would do with all their leisure time. Alvin Toffler (1970) forecast the arrival of a paperless society and the end of technocracy, and William Mitchell (1996) anticipated fluid opportunities for working people operating out of their “electronic cottage” living rooms. Intended to lift America from the pessimism of its military and political defeats in Indochina, Nicaragua, and elsewhere, fear of a stagflationary economy, and deep concerns about environmental decay in the 1970s, “post-industrial” futurology was an upbeat narrative about a world that still belonged to America. False optimism based on techno-centric reasoning, however, was to provide little insight and profound misunderstandings about the real social changes to come.

What have always intervened in technological and promotional fantasies are the underlying political economy, movements of organized resistance, and new critical intellectual awareness. But while critical literature on promotional culture is expanding, few studies have attempted to explain the trend from the perspective of what the contributors to this volume see as its political and economic underpinnings. In *The Propaganda Society*, we link the growth of propaganda and promotion to the neoliberal regime of capitalist accumulation,