

Documentary films as
a tool of
governmental
propaganda media
essay



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Over the centuries, propaganda has been a strategic tool used by governments and military organizations and alliances in influencing people's thinking. Several researches indicate that propaganda has always been a key component of military recruitment exercises. Documentary films have been crucial for any government actively seeking to mobilize or influence its citizens. Documentary films as a means of propagating the spread of war propaganda tend to vilify the enemy and at the same time assert the amazing qualities of a country and its people and allies. Each and every country is prone to propaganda regardless of the nature of its government. Propaganda operates through subtle but covert transmission of ideas and values. When countries are engulfed in crises, their respective governments often resort to using propaganda to influence and change the beliefs and views of their citizens. In most cases the techniques of propaganda are neutral. Much as propaganda is used for ill ends in most cases, it is nearly as often used to achieve good ends at times.

Propaganda by the government is very high especially during the times of tension and general unrest. The instruments of communication are in most cases the mass media but also include such things as coinages, statues and certain other forms of interpersonal communication. Political documentaries sometimes walk a fine line between advocacy and propaganda. In both the first and the second world wars, both parties to the conflict used propaganda movies to support their war efforts but there were considerable differences in their respective approaches in the use of these films. One way of effectively employing full scale flow of propaganda is by censoring news reports. Censorship is a special form of propaganda classified as selective

and deliberate omission. It entails the selection from a variety of facts only which vehemently articulates and strengthens the propagandists viewpoint. Censorship of certain elements of mass communication is a powerful tool used by governments in spreading propaganda. And when, the government of a country plays role of a propagandist, it becomes very powerful because the government has extensive control over all forms of media. The success of censorship depends widely on how successful the government is in omitting undesirable viewpoints.

After the Second World War, the method used to gain support from troops and citizens throughout the world and most notably among the Allied nations had to be changed. This meant that the propagandists had to be more creative. Giving of mere speeches to the soldiers and the general public was no longer effective. Documentary films became a more popular choice for persuading the American soldiers that the war was necessary.

Purposes and Aims of the research study

There has been a rising debate over the last few decades with regards to the increasing use of documentary films in spreading misleading information. More recently, in particular the underachievement of governments in military activities has become a topical concern and taken a focus in itself.

Aitken, I., (2005), suggests that research is a process which can help to understand the relationship between propaganda and mass communication. This research project stems from a personal interest in trying to understand the use of documentary films by governments in transmitting propaganda.

This curiosity was initially sparked upon discovering an article whilst undertaking voluntary work at a local military camp (Aitken, 2005)

With more involvement in the government, a greater realization with regards to the government practices that teaching staff employed in trying to provide an enriched information system began to be realized. It also came to notice the difficulties that governments and troops face in promoting inclusive information flow for the citizens.

This research is not necessarily undertaken with the need for government reform, but as a tool to develop individuals' knowledge through extensive research carried out by them. With the focus of the project being on a hot topic in the perception of the main policy makers, this research can be useful for all practitioners, government agencies and teaching staff who already work or are interested in seeing a career in mass communication. With government also recognizing the importance of documentary films, the study can also be beneficial for troops and their families. It can also serve an interest to those people who have a general curiosity in the film industry.

The aims of this research are to understand the inherent implications of using films to convey propaganda. In particular, the different strategies and techniques introduced by the government of a country try and motivate their citizens to adopt their policies. The study will also endeavor to try and understand the constituents of different motivational attitudes and experiences that propaganda brings with it in the social context of the people's lives.

Research questions:

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? What influence has propaganda in influencing people's attitudes towards adopting government policies?

? How effective are documentary films in disseminating propaganda?

? What possible factors, attitudes or experiences affect government's choices of documentary films as a tool for spreading propaganda?

Literature review

In the 20th century, mass communication became a very important tool for learning. Major revolutions occurred in the communication industry and these had a significant influence on both the moral and political realms. In America for instance, films became an important tool used by the government in transmitting social and political messages to the people. This marked the first time in the history of the United States of America that the government had the opportunity to shape the ideas and perception of its citizen directly. Most of the messages spread through these films were in some cases lies meant to influence the people for some reasons. These messages were mostly influenced by political motivations and their impact was felt mostly across the political sphere. This gave rise to new forms of spreading propaganda (Combs, 1994).

Propaganda has been defined as a deliberate attempt to influence people to think and behave in a manner that is pleasing to the source. Several countries all over the world have in one way or the other employed some form of propaganda by use of documentary films. It was in the 20th century that new forms of spreading propaganda emerged and these revolved

around political entities in their pursuit to communicate messages that would sway their targets in order to accommodate and further their agenda.

The United States of America is one country that has a long history of using documentary films to spread propaganda. For instance, during the Second World War, the government of the United States of America released series of war features that depicted the Japanese troops as being bloodthirsty but glorified the American army and cast their country as being innocent. However, these war features were not true but were meant to influence people's support of America's involvement in the war.

The success of the use of propaganda depends to a great extent on the support that the masses are able to offer. This is measured by the level of infiltration to the majority of the aspects of life of the people. Documentary propaganda were the choice of the government as a result of its capacity to spread some potent, positive images of leaders who are powerful as well as strong with all ability of a superior electorate.

During and around this time film and propaganda went hand in hand and this saw major increases in military enlistment and an overall feeling of patriotism and sovereignty reigned throughout the United States of America. Propaganda is closely related to public relations both of which are in turn related to advertisement. Burton, (1990) reckons that propaganda and advertising are twin sisters; advertisements connect things with human desires but propaganda shapes infinite things into concrete images. It is this close relationship between propaganda and advertisements that blind people into believing lies spread by propaganda (Burton, 1990).

Over the centuries, propaganda has been a strategic tool used by governments and military organizations and alliances in influencing people's thinking. As David, (1998) notes, propaganda has always been a key component of military recruitment exercises. Documentary films have been crucial for any government actively seeking to mobilize or influence its citizens. The famous American Revolution for instance could not have been conceived without making the case for it known to the general public. The Emancipation Proclamation has been accused of furthering acts of political propaganda as initially it was restricted to the southern states that were still under the control of the Union. The promulgation of the Proclamation assisted in the recruitment of more black soldiers and helped prevent British soldiers from recognizing the Confederacy. To this end the Emancipation Proclamation served political and military ends (David, 1998)

It would be important to appreciate the fact that the use of propaganda revolves around the manipulation of some symbols, ideas as well as images with the intention of persuading a group of relatively large size to think towards a specific line. Propaganda has to achieve the goal of preventing the people from accumulating some questions about the message or even a critical thought outside the bounds of the parameters associated with the message. If this is applied then the message that is delivered is regarded to be a truth that cannot be challenged. The realization of this fact is the best qualifier towards the choice of documentary films to serve the purpose of propagating the government propaganda. This is a means that has the greatest likelihood of attracting the majority of the people and therefore the

message will be effectively being disseminated across a wide range of the population (Bernard, 2003).

At the time of the 2nd World War, Germany together with its allies tactfully made the use of propaganda films aimed at reinforcing their efforts of the war. However, there existed some important disparities in their respective uses as well as approaches. Both of the side had a strong believe that their cause of the war was justified and they had to participate in the war.

However, at the time that they were required to give it a try as well as a prove with the use of a documentary film, the exact course of war in itself complicated the situation in as far as Germany was concerned while on the other side, the allies enjoyed a comfortable time. The Germans made all efforts towards the application of the propaganda documentaries to demonstrate the exact reason behind their participation in the war coupled with the actual reason behind their anticipation of war (Culbert, 1945).

In America and also in Britain, no single person was entrusted with the complete control of the industry. They made the use of the military as well as the government agencies having individual directors exposed to a substantial extent of freedom of the choice of applicable topics. According the Americans, there was a strong believes about God being on their side in as far as democracy was concerned. Although there were some people on the Germany side who had a strong faith in God, there was no possibility that God was in a position of condoning the barbaric acts that they did with regard to the war. As a result of the disagreements that arose at the time of the war, the government of America opted to come up with symbols which rallied the public cause. There was a dire need of fighting for the sake of <https://assignbuster.com/documentary-films-as-a-tool-of-governmental-propaganda-media-essay/>

protection of their democracy and the symbol became an indicator to the enemy of the worst evil inherent in the war (Rotha, 1973).

All the films of this nature had the sole intension of boosting the morale. There was a constant worry among the army with regard to the problem associated with the war. All possible mechanisms that were identified to have the potential of instilling the desire of fighting were put in place although there was none that was seen to bear good fruits. It is only after some of the officials saw the film called "Triumph of the Will" that the idea of the use of the films as a form of propaganda came in to being. They discovered that the use of films had a trick as an alternative approach. The threats associated with the films had to be assigned a special person to interpret what they meant. The use of documentary films was therefore seen to contribute significantly towards the notion of the people as to the reason why war was justified (Philip, 1997).

The first of the films were specifically reserved to be viewed by the military. However, after President Roosevelt accessed the view if the film "Prelude to War" a series called "Why We Fight", he found it wise for all people including children women and men to view the film. A wide scope of the film covered a lot of important history that the president recommended should be accessed by all people. The scenes that reinforced the moralities of the Christians were seen to benefit the people which were the cause of the fight for the Americans. The move was seen to be rich in patriotism and the sight of the film opened the minds of the people to the reasons behind the war.

Spreading of government propaganda seems to have come of age during the First World War. During this time, all major combatants and their allies created special agencies to monitor, regulate and censor the flow of information, help in the recruitment of more troops and also sell the moral validity of their combat activities to those both in the home front and also in the battle front. This war saw the emergence of derogatory connotations that have up to date surrounded the concept propaganda. The American people lost their understanding of the close relationship between education, morale and propaganda and instead considered propaganda to be synonymous to government lies, a notion that has stood its ground to present times. The New Deal America formally institutionalized propaganda and public relations within the wider American society. President Franklin Roosevelt promoted the policies of his directly through press conferences. During one of those public press conferences, the president underscore the essence of America giving war materials to those countries that were fighting Germany. In essence, Roosevelt helped America in a great deal to sell much of her foreign policy by using the talents of the propagandist counsel.

A famous documentary film maker, Pare Lorentz produced films for the new Deal that were about flooding in the Mississippi valley. These films depicted natural disasters as being caused by unchecked human actions and cast the New Deal as being capable of solving physical and natural disasters through enactment of state policies. Government's appeal to those who were better off financially than the rest was documented by the photographers from Farm Security Administration. Their depiction of alarming levels of rural poverty helped justify the government's relief programs and also made

people aware of the great role of photography in streamlining public relations campaigns (Nichols, 1997).

During the Second World War, the American army's bureau of public relations engaged in paying job of collecting news from the battle front than using competing civilian agency, Office of War Information. In this new strategy of combating spread of war information, all footages shot in various war theatres were subject to military censorship, more especially if they showed images of dead American soldiers. The then army chief of staff commissioned the director of Hollywood movies to explain the essence of the war to millions of soldiers in a series of documentaries. Hollywood then produced several series of propaganda films which divided the world into forces of light and darkness. Enemy footages were video-edited to make clearly show the dangers of totalitarianism. According to Saunders, (2010) the precise impact of these war films is hard to tell but then the films served the most elaborate statement of war produced by any government during the conflict (Saunders, 2010).

During the cold war, it proved a boom time for spreading information materials intended for the captive people of Eastern Europe. The Voice of America that was established in 1950 specifically to broadcast controlled news to countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain was soon joined by the Radio Free Europe. The United States Information Agency (USIA) became an official state agency for spreading war propaganda.

The infamous Vietnam War revealed the vulnerability and problems of uncoordinated military information management. This war was characterized

by absence of overt censorship of the civilian news organizations even though military planes were strictly not to carry hostile news reporters to classified zones of the war front. One of the largest sources of the US military's complaints about this war was the so called credibility gap. The apparent discrepancies between official government news and the civilian reported news in battle field failure led to the US government's Public Affairs Office to hold daily afternoon briefings in which it blatantly exaggerated the figures of enemy culprits. Each day, pentagon spokesmen reported astronomical figures of enemy dead always much higher than the numbers of American victims (Miriam, 2005).

Again the Vietnam War taught America a lot of lessons about the need to censor all military information and the need for a well equipped and sophisticated public relations agency. In light of this, the US government made significant changes with regard to handling of military and war related information. Most of these changes were reflected in the 1991 gulf War. Most of the media coverage actually missed to highlight what was really happening. This contributed very much to battlefield victory by reinforcing much of Saddam's belief that the Allied Coalitions attacks could be launched from Kuwait City, a thing which was never the case as attacks were launched simultaneously from fixed desert positions. The management of military news in America now seems to be following a well established policy even though this at times can be at cost of the freedom of the press. Further, the enactment of news management policies has greatly underscored the importance of propaganda and also public relations to the success of military activities