

نشر الدعاية في أوقات الأزمات

دراسة حول تقنيات الدعاية لمنظمة الصحة العالمية خلال جائحة كوفيد 19

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Communicating Propaganda in Times of Crisis:

Investigation of the WHO Propaganda Techniques during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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تاريخ النشر: 2022/03/30

تاريخ القبول: 2022/03/23

تاريخ الاستلام: 2022/01/30

Abstract

When dealing with propaganda analysis, researchers commonly draw on Lee and Lee's (1939) propaganda techniques to understand the tactics employed by the propagandist to influence public opinion or mould it towards a specific purpose. These techniques were quoted in a book titled "The Fine Art of Propaganda" published by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in 1937. Aiming to teach the Americans how to recognize the seven common propaganda devices, the institute managed to create a list of propaganda techniques that have become standard in mass media and continued to be used to a large extent in the modern times. The list contains these seven techniques: Name Calling, Glittering Generalities, Transfer, Testimonial, Plain Folks, Card Stacking, and Band Wagon. Inspired by the work of the IPA, this study provides a content analysis of the propaganda techniques used by the World Health Organization during the global health crisis of COVID-19 and aims at identifying and analysing those seven devices as manifest in the selected websites articulating the WHO. For the

purpose of this article, the subject of propaganda techniques is worth exploring because it proves very significant since it clarifies how the propagandist and propaganda work to win its cause during global crisis.

Keywords: The World Health Organization; propaganda techniques; COVID-19

ملخص

يلجأ محللو الدعاية عادة الى كتاب « The Fine Art of Propaganda » لمؤلفيه Lee and Lee وذلك من أجل فهم التقنيات التي تستخدمها الدعاية للتأثير على الرأي العام أو تشكيله وتوجيهه نحو غرض معين، الكتاب تم نشره من قبل معهد تحليل الدعاية في عام 7391 لتوعية الرأي العام الأمريكي بأساليب وتقنيات « البروباغندا » التي استعملت أثناء الحرب العالمية. وقد تمكن المعهد من إنشاء قائمة من تقنيات الدعاية التي أصبحت شائعة في وسائل الإعلام واستمر استخدامها إلى حد كبير في العصر الحديث. ركز خبراء المعهد على سبع تقنيات أساسية للدعاية وهي التقنيات التي سنركز عليها في مقالتنا هذه من خلال لجوئنا إلى دراسة نماذج من تقنيات الدعاية السبعة التي استخدمتها منظمة الصحة العالمية أثناء الأزمة الصحية العالمية لـ كوفيد-19 في مواقعها الاليكترونية خلال فترات عديدة من الأزمة .

الكلمات المفتاحية: منظمة الصحة العالمية ؛ وتقنيات الدعاية ؛كوفيد-19

INTRODUCTION

Since its appearance in December 2019, coronavirus outbreak tested the resilience of people and economy all over the world. Millions of people have lost hundreds of thousands of their loved ones (Roser et al., 2020) and large businesses have been seriously affected by a decline in demand, supply deficiencies and production suspensions. COVID-19 has turned into a global crisis, developing at unprecedented pace and extent. It has created a common priority for governments and organizations around the world to mount a speedy and effective response to the situation and take urgent action to safeguard their people. In this context, from the first case identified, false or misleading information about Covid-19 became

more prevalent than ever before, highly increasing the level of uncertainties surrounding the pandemic, giving rise to conspiracy theorists and anti-mask protest and “leaving people confused, misled, and ill-advised” (UNICEF, 2020). To help respond to this global chaos and unprecedented challenge, the World Health Organization has launched multi-pronged effort to combat COVID-19. The World Health Organization (WHO) has led and coordinated global effort, supporting governments to prevent, detect, and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and mainly managing the infodemic and fighting disinformation and misinformation. With the media, particularly social media, providing false information and, sometimes, feeding a sense of uncertainty about the pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has initiated proactive approach over the course of the crisis using propaganda and anti-propaganda strategies to combat falsehoods. With the purpose of refuting misinformation and providing trustworthy facts, the World Health Organization established social media chatbots in Rakuten Viber and WhatsApp to deliver information on COVID-19. It has also created a specific webpage for debunking misinformation about the pandemic (Gabarron et al., 2021). Given its twofold advantage of wide reach at low cost, the Internet helped the World Health Organization to reach potential audiences all over the world and employ propaganda to influence public opinion. Thanks to the potential of virtual space in providing a unique opportunity for public discussion (Cooley et al., 2016), propaganda is placed as a top priority on the public agenda (Chang and Lin, 2014). This research conducts qualitative content analysis of some of the main websites where the World Health Organization is active on. Mention can be made of Name Calling, Glittering Generalities, Transfer, Testimonial, Plain Folks, Card Stacking, and Band Wagon. Inspired by the work of the IPA, the research aims at locating and examining those seven techniques as manifest in some of the main websites

articulating the World Health Organization.

The IPA propaganda techniques

No debate of propaganda would be complete without referring to the book entitled "The Fine Art of Propaganda" published by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA). Created by a number of prominent scholars and researchers including journalists, instructors, historians, social scientists, and opinion leaders, the IPA aimed at educating the American public about the nature of political propaganda to help them "be able to recognize propaganda, to analyse it, and to appraise it." (Lee & Lee, 1939). Concerns were raised due to the growing amount of propaganda, emanating from various sources that impeded people's ability to think plainly and right away (Jowett, G. S., & O' Donnell, 2012, p. 237). The Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) released the second edition of Propaganda Analysis in its monthly bulletin where it provided the famous seven common "devices" or "ABCs of propaganda analysis" in an article entitled "How to Detect Propaganda" (1937). These devices or techniques are considered as instruments that may be employed "at the whim of the propagandist" to "influence the action of others" (Vallance, 1951). The devices suggested by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) are Name-Calling, Glittering Generality, Transfer, Testimonial, Plain Folks, Card Stacking, and Band Wagon. Edited by Alfred McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee, the book, which included the seven devices, offered a "candid and impartial study of the devices and apparent objectives of specialists in the distortion of public opinions." (Glander, 1999: p. 23). According to Combs and Nimmo (1993), "these seven devices have been repeated so frequently in lectures, articles and textbooks ever since that they have become virtually synonymous with the practice

and analysis of propaganda in all its aspects.” (Combs and Nimmo, 1993). It is important to mention that “in the 1930s, these seven common devices became the cornerstone of the institute’s applied studies of contemporary propaganda” (Jowett, G. S., & O’ Donnell, 2012, p.232). After the September 11th attacks, Allen used these techniques to highlight how the President George W. Bush’s use religious rhetoric in his speeches (Allen 2002: 4149-). Inspired by the work of the IPA, this research aims at locating the seven techniques in the websites articulating the World Health Organisation during the period of coronavirus health crisis.

Methodology

The main objective of this research is to identify specific examples of the seven propaganda techniques identified by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) in the content of some of the World Health Organization websites. As the research focuses on the daily content posted on the homepages of the websites under investigation, the researcher opted for using content analysis approach to investigate those propaganda techniques employed on the internet by the World Health Organization. Content analysis is defined as “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages.” (Holsti, O. R. 1969). “Content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique.” (Hsieh, & Shannon, 2005). The research uses qualitative data obtained from websites owned by the World Health Organization including mainly Facebook page and the official website of the WHO. It managed to authenticate that a great amount of those propaganda techniques has been successfully used on the internet by the World Health Organization in its websites as an attempt to manipulate the public opinion and achieve its main goal in containing the

pandemic.

Propaganda Analysis

When the World Health Organisation announced COVID-19 as a pandemic, lives of billions of people around the globe have been turned upside down, and notably health, economic, environmental and social fields. The crisis was by no means unprecedented as the organisation has never faced a viral outbreak as such. The rapid spread of this pandemic all over the world compelled the World Health Organisation to involve in a global coordination with the purpose of mitigating the effects of the novel coronavirus, particularly when viral spread of COVID-19 fake news came to dominate the media and online. The organisation took a comprehensive approach including propaganda tactics to contain the threat posed by misinformation and online anti-vaccination campaigns. The global health crisis of COVID 19 offers important instances of how the World Health Organisation has used propaganda as an effective instrument to win the battle against coronavirus misinformation and to control the public opinion. Propaganda techniques have been used to fulfil this goal. All through the COVID-19 pandemic, a fair amount of those techniques has been effectively employed by the World Health Organisation on its official webpages designed for leveraging relevant psychosocial influences in the target audience. An analysis of the World Health Organization websites authenticates the prevalence of the seven propaganda techniques indicated by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) and their use by the World Health Organization to shape public opinion. Mention can be made of Name Calling, Glittering Generalities, Transfer, Testimonial, Plain Folks, Card Stacking, and Band Wagon.

Name calling is one of the most prevalent techniques identified in the web-

sites articulating the World Health Organisation. It is one of the seven devices recognised by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis. According to Lee and Lee (1939), name calling refers to the fact when “giving an idea a bad label-is used to make us reject and condemn the idea without examining the evidence”. Using the name-calling tactic, a person or an idea is often associated with a negative label. The propagandist who employs this technique believes that instead of looking at the evidence, the audience would reject the person, or the idea based on the bad label. The technique was intended to incite prejudice in the target audience by characterizing the opponent as something the target audience fear, despise, or find distasteful. In this case, on its websites, vaccine opponents who share misleading information about COVID-19 and a number of those who speak against its policy are labelled as “conspiracy theorist”, “trolls” and “myth-busters”. In this regard, the WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, “We’re not just battling the virus, we’re also battling the trolls and conspiracy theorists that push misinformation and undermine the outbreak response.” (World Health Organisation, 2020). By using these names, the WHO Director-General attempts to arouse feeling of mistrust in the target audience to disapprove the opposition of rivals.

Glittering Generality is the second most common technique employed by the World Health Organisation in its websites. Lee and Lee (1939) define Glittering Generality as “associating something with a “virtue word”-is used to make us accept and approve the thing without examining the evidence”. Glittering Generalities, name calling in reverse, are ambiguous words or phrases that seek to elicit positive feeling rather than provide information. Because they are often linked to highly esteemed ideas, they need approval without thinking or evidence. Words like “democracy” “freedom” “love of country” “glory” “honour”, for example, have

a positive meaning to people because they are associated with ideas they value. (Abd Ghani, 2010). In the context of COVID-19, the World Health Organisation often seek to win over the hearts and minds of its target audience by linking the fight against COVID-19 to ideas like “family values”, “love of country or community” and “patriotism”. Emotional statements and slogans such as “stay at home to protect yourself, your family, our frontliners, the community, and our country”, build solidarity by showing others you care”, “keep the people you love healthy” are typically used in propaganda advertisements by the World Health Organisation to evoke positive feelings into people and persuade them to accept and approve of the main message of the organisation. Similarly, by using the slogan “be ready to fight COVID 19”, the World Health Organisation seems to persuade “patriotic” people to join the battle against the pandemic which threaten the stability of the country and safety of its people.

Transfer is another propaganda technique that is extensively used by the World Health Organisation in its websites. According to Lee and Lee (1939), “Transfer carries the authority, sanction, and prestige of something respected and revered over to something else in order to make the latter acceptable; or it carries authority, sanction, and disapproval to cause us to reject and disapprove something the propagandist would have us reject and disapprove” In the Transfer technique, symbols are regularly employed to stir emotions and strong feeling. The flag is the symbol of the country and the Christian Church is represented by the cross. In a similar way, Propagandists may seek to transfer the reputation of science, “religion, and medicine to endorse an issue. The world Health Organisation used specialists and health experts to claim that the vaccination campaign is supported and authenticated by scientific research. Similarly, in some cases, the prestige of religion is also carried over by the organisation to persuade target audience

to take coronavirus vaccine. In this regard, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization, met with senior leaders of “Religions for Peace”, an international coalition of representatives from the world’s religions, for a high-level discussion on the significance of multi-faith cooperation in response to the pandemic, in particular, the role of church leaders and groups in the COVID-19 vaccination rollout (World Health Organization, 2021a).

Bandwagon is another example of propaganda techniques employed on the World Health Organization websites. Lee and Lee (1939) state that “Band Wagon has as its theme, “Everybody-at least all of us-is doing it”; with it, the propagandist attempts to convince us that all members of a group to which we belong are accepting his program and that we must therefore follow our crowd and “jump on the band wagon.”. This technique persuades us to join the crowd, and because few people prefer to be left behind, this technique can be very effective (Cooper, 1971). In the context of Coronavirus health crisis, this technique has served to rally people behind the World Health Organisation in its fight against COVID-19. The World Health Organisation has called on us to “join renowned musicians, bands, entertainers, filmmakers and artists with concerts, live sessions and art shows to raise funds for the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund” (World Health Organization, n.d.).

Plain Folk serves as another important technique of propaganda. Lee and Lee (1939) define Plain Folk as “the method by which a speaker attempts to convince his audience that he and his ideas are good because they are “of the people,” the plain folks.”. By using Plain Folks technique, the propagandists try to convince audiences that they – celebrities and leaders- are common people just like any other common people by emphasising the concerns and attitudes of those ordinary

people (Hamdani, 2018). In this way, a lot of politicians and celebrities have their photos taken while getting their vaccines. UN Secretary-General António Guterres received his first dosage of the COVID-19 vaccination in late January. The snapshot of the incident, on the other hand, isn't just a record of the incident; it's also a piece of propaganda, meticulously crafted to inspire and motivate others (Hobbs, 2021). In one of its statements, the World Health Organisation recommended employers and organisations to get vaccinated by stating that "Organizations and employers can boost confidence by openly sharing their support for vaccination, or personal experience of getting vaccinated. This helps to promote vaccination acceptance as a social norm in the workplace" (World Health Organization, 2021b). This manner of presence implies that their attitude reflects common sense. It is an attempt to persuade people to support an idea by giving the impression that leaders share the same views on the same issue

Card stacking is one of the seven devices highlighted by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA). It "involves the selection and use of facts or falsehoods, illustrations or distractions, and logical or illogical statements in order to give the best or the worst possible case for an idea, program, person, or product." (Lee and Lee, 1939) Card Stacking is often used with the intention of highlighting positive aspects of an issue while restraining any possible negative features or side-effects. "It is truth in half" (Malone, 2019). In its war against rumourmongers and conspiracy theorist, the World Health Organization has worked on monitoring the flow of information online. As misinformation campaigns were growing faster, the World Health Organization has driven parallel information campaigns, conveying messages that aim at disproving the overabundance of information and the rapid spread of misleading or fabricated news, images, and videos about the virus. In this regard, unfavourable statistics and facts about the pandemic and vaccination

are often omitted in ads. Despite the overabundance of COVID-19 “infodemic”, the World Health Organization has continued to largely expand scientific knowledge on the new virus and provide advice to people worldwide on measures to protect health and prevent the spread of the outbreak. In addition to this, to fight COVID-19 infodemic, the World Health Organization has partnered with a number of stakeholders including UK government to run awareness campaigns on the risks of misinformation. One campaign is called “‘Stop the Spread’ launched on BBC World television, website and apps during May and June 2020, and aimed at raising people’s awareness of the huge size of misinformation about the pandemic and urging them to verify information, therefore reducing the risks and spread of misinformation. In the same way, the World Health Organization created an online game called Go Viral! In this game, players are granted a shareable grade and were connected to WHO’s COVID-19 ‘MythBusters’. The aim of this game is to disclose the most widespread infodemics disseminated by rumourmonger and to highlight information advocated by the World Health Organization.

Testimonial is also one of the most persuasive techniques of propaganda. It “consists in having some respected or hated person say that a given idea or program, or product or person is good or bad” (Lee and Lee ,1939). The main objective of “the propagandist who uses testimonial, of course, that your feeling towards the famous person will transfer to the product or the cause he or she is endorsing” (Shabo, 2008, p.63). In its strategy to persuade people to take vaccination, the WHO stated in one of the webpages of its official website “One of the best ways to address people’s concerns about getting vaccinated is to refer them to someone they trust” (World Health Organization, 2021b). For this reason, the World Health

Organization has mobilised many internationally recognized celebrities to boost Covid-19 inoculation and assist those whose health and livelihoods have been impacted by COVID-19. Celebrities and leaders have been greatly mobilised by the WHO to stay active on the media and great events sharing their advice for helping and offering their suggestions and recommendations for people to impede the spread of the coronavirus. As a case in point, the World Health Organization's Big Event for Mental Health took place on World Mental Health Day, October 10th, and brought together world leaders, internationally famous celebrities, and mental health advocates. The event featured a rich programme of performances and talks with celebrities and activists including Queen Mathilde of the Belgians, Epsy Campbell Barr, First Vice-President of Costa Rica, Alisson Becker: goalkeeper for Liverpool Football, Korede Bello: Nigerian singer and songwriter, to name but a few. Similarly, Oprah Winfrey, Lady Gaga and Rihanna put their privilege to good use, helping fight back against the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Since late 2019, COVID-19 has spread rapidly across the globe, leading to one of the most serious health crises worldwide, accompanied by a huge 'infodemic' of information. When media quickly became overwhelmed with unprecedented influx of information, misinformation and fake news have represented a significant issue creating confusion and insecurity among people. The World Health Organisation has moved rapidly to face the threat posed by the media using all kind of defensive measures to contain the Coronavirus (COVID-19). The organization has used diverse tactics and strategies to fight against COVID-19. Propaganda constituted large part of the organization -linked information strategy to discredit a massive

wave of false and misleading information and attempts by rumour-mongers and conspiracy theorists to have sway over the public. As propaganda has been an effective instrument to shape public opinion and action for times ago (Bugaj, 2019), propaganda techniques were used by the World Health Organization to persuade and alter people worldwide into supporting its fight against COVID-19 and those of scepticism toward vaccines. Based on the analysis advanced in the research, it seems that the World Health Organization has got involved in a shrewd and well-designed plan of propaganda and managed to counterbalance and outdo the counter-propaganda launched by sceptics. Having grasped the techniques of propaganda and media manipulation of the public opinion, outcomes achieved on the ground demonstrate the WHO's effective strategy vis-à-vis the COVID-19 health crisis. Although the main purpose of this research is not to conduct a quantitative analysis of propaganda techniques, some reflections can be made on their dominance. On the World Health Organization's webpages, wide prevalence of propaganda techniques has been remarked. All of the websites under investigation appear to use the technique of Glittering generalities. The fact that the technique is still used in the form of simple, clever slogans that appeal to people' feelings and values like "solidarity" "security" as well as symbols like "world flags" explains its wide prevalence., Reliance on Glittering Generalities as a propaganda tactic could indicate that the World Health Organization places a little importance on value judgment. On the other hand, there is a reduced utilization of the name-calling technique. This may be explained by the World Health Organization's endeavour to gain credibility among its target audiences by taking an official attitude through its websites, avoiding the use of excessively critical and negative terminology while dealing with COVID-19. On the whole, it appears that the various uses of propaganda techniques, as well as their prevalence, are

dependent on the situation that propagandists may encounter and the objective that they seek to achieve.

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