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# Criminology and Propaganda Studies: Charting New Horizons in Criminological Thought

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Criminology and propaganda studies have both substantially influenced political, public and commercial thought yet not as a co-ordinated, embedded twine. Propaganda studies identify how narratives are constructed, conveyed and embedded within public and political discourses. To enhance existing debates, this article stirs the criminological cauldron with critical insights from propaganda analyses. Criminology is an evolving crucible, a gravitational black hole that imbues, harnesses and inculcates diverse perspectives in the pursuit of originality, criticality and creativity. By drawing on historical and contemporary propaganda scholarship we aim to enrich criminological theory, policy and practice. Our intention is not to critique, supplant or subvert existing criminological discourse but to invigorate it with the proponents, and prospects of propaganda studies.

**KEY WORDS:** propaganda, ecofacism, copaganda, astroturfing, greenwashing

## INTRODUCTION

The papal bull *Inscrutabili Divinae* (1622) was Pope Gregory XV's *Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith* and deemed to be the first text adopting the term 'propaganda' since antiquity ([Prendergast and Prendergast 2014](#)). Nearly 75 years later, in 1695, the Licensing of the Press Act 1662 was repealed. This act was a statute of the United Kingdom Parliament that controlled and suppressed printed material deemed critical or 'seditious' of the Crown ([Deazley 2008](#)). The act was repealed to prevent the previous pre-approval of printed press. Thus ended the censorship of what would eventually become known as 'free speech' ([Robertson 2009](#)). The time to 'propagate' one's ideas and ideologies had arrived. These developments, combined with the Triennial Act 1694, which mandated, for the first

time, annual parliamentary sittings and compulsory three-yearly elections, created the context for the proliferation of printing presses and the production of volumes of political party literature. The frequency of elections required both Tories and Whigs to garner support for their ideologies through advertising, dissemination and electioneering—efforts that became known as ‘political propaganda’ (Downie 2008: 1).

The word propaganda has since conjured images and discourses of oppressive political ideologies embedded in notions of half-truths, deceit and information manipulation (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, propaganda studies grew expansively, particularly in the United States and Europe (Lasswell et al. 1935; Sproule 1987; Institute of Communications Research 1955). The growth of propaganda analyses included a peak of activity in response to a recognized gap in knowledge that fulfilled a key social need, namely, to question, understand and think more critically about information transmitted to mass audiences in the wake of World War I. This peak, however, was followed by a decline and displacement of academic propaganda discourses due to changing ideas about ‘what constitutes knowledge’ (Sproule 1987: 60). The subjugation of propaganda studies by mainstream, increasingly dominant knowledges and political motivations, align the original propaganda studies with critical criminology’s own disruptive and subversive heart. Propaganda analysis began as a critical paradigm that was subsequently side-lined and subsumed into the broader field of mass communication studies. Critical criminology emerged out of discontent with mainstream analyses and their relative silence on the ideological drivers of criminalization and criminal justice. Our hope is to bring these two areas of scholarship together and invigorate and inspire criminological discourse with arguments, concepts and theories proposed within propaganda studies.

These contributions come at a timely moment. In the aftermath of the 2016 United States presidential elections, academic, political and media discussion of ‘fake news’ began to proliferate. Recent criminological scholarship has identified the pressing need for critical thinking to define fake news and assess its threat (Miró-Llinares and Aguerri, 2023). Miró-Llinares and Aguerri’s (2023) advance a thoughtful and rigorous discussion of the conditions under which information is deemed to be ‘fake’ or a threat and the caution criminology and criminal justice agencies must exercise in defining both false information and its impact.

This article examines how propaganda studies’ tools for identifying mechanisms of manipulation can be applied in criminological analyses of ‘fake’ information. It provides a brief history of the emergence, decline and revival of propaganda analyses, arguing that the work and public education approach of propaganda scholars can contribute to existing debates in criminology and chart new horizons in criminological analyses and discourse. It interrogates three emerging and significant sites of engagement, namely, ‘ecofascism’, ‘copaganda’ and issues of ‘greenwashing’ and ‘astroturfing’ and demonstrates how propaganda can be defined, analyzed and identified. Thus, this article launches a call for propaganda studies within criminology. We argue that the analytical tools of propaganda have much to offer criminologists concerned with examining different kinds of ‘fake’ information and identifying the ideological roots of crime, harm, criminalization and criminal justice policy (Loader and Sparks 2016; Reiman and Leighton 2016).

## PROPAGANDA STUDIES—INNOVATIONS FOR CRIMINOLOGICAL THOUGHT

In 1987, J. Michael Sproule’s ‘Propaganda Studies in American Social Science: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Paradigm’ detailed the vicissitudes of propaganda studies. He opens this article by stating that:

One outgrowth of post-World War I disillusionment in the U.S.A. was the emergence of a critical perspective on social influence known as propaganda analysis. Although this line of inquiry held considerable sway in American social science during the 1920s and 1930s, the scope and influence of this academic paradigm are relatively unknown today (Sproule 1987: 60).

In the wake of WWI, respected journalist and critical thinker Walter Lippmann (1922) argued that the nature of democracy in America had been changed by public recognition of not only news censorship but also propaganda campaigns conducted through such previously trusted news sources. The voting public was dependent on mass communication as the means of receiving information, but this had become tainted during the war. For Lippmann, educating the public and preventing such propagandizing on official news channels were nothing less than a central concerns for democracy.

The rise in propaganda awareness and the recognition that public opinion could be shaped, changed or otherwise manipulated by news outlets and advertising campaigns led to a fervour of interest amongst social scientists across a wide range of disciplines (Sproule 1987: 64). This surge of academic activity resulted in systematic propaganda studies, the development of relevant analytical frameworks and education programmes intended to equip all citizens with the critical thinking skills necessary to identify propaganda and avoid its seductive and persuasive guile (Sproule 1987; 2001; Jowett and O'Donnell 2015). Indeed, in 1931 the Social Science Research Council appointed a Committee on Pressure Groups and Propaganda to survey the subject of propaganda and the existing state of propaganda research. This mandate led to the publication of the weighty *Propaganda and Promotional Activities: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lasswell et al. 1935). The publications cited and summarised in this volume, as well as a wealth of subsequent propaganda research and analyses throughout the 1930s, constitute a robust paradigm that can be mined and applied to present-day problems of information provenance bedevilling news outlets, social media and other internet-based sources of information.

Critical propaganda analysis was, in part, heavily concerned with public education and how to identify propaganda. This concern led to the introduction of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA), established in 1937 by journalist and Columbia University professor Clyde R. Miller (Sproule 1997; Jowett and O'Donnell 2015). One of the first activities of the IPA was to publish a monthly bulletin, *Propaganda Analysis*. In its second issue, the bulletin published 'How to Detect Propaganda', which outlined seven propaganda devices (Jowett and O'Donnell 2015). These seven plainly written and easy-to-understand statements were equally accessible to school children and the general public alike, and quickly became a standard feature of inter-world-war propaganda analysis in the United States. The devices remained important in the propaganda analysis and mass communications literature. In the early 2000s, Sproule noted that 'the rubric has been reprinted, cited, alluded to, critiqued or reworked constantly during the last 65 years' (Sproule 2001: 135). These devices offer an accessible guide for those concerned with identifying propaganda in the form of 'fake news' and provide a possible foundation for criminologists concerned with such endeavours. As summarized by Lee and Lee (1979, cited in Jowett and O'Donnell 2015: 258), the seven devices are:

- (1) **Name calling.** Giving an idea a bad label and therefore rejecting and condemning it without examining the evidence.
- (2) **Glittering generality.** Associating something with a 'virtue word' and creating acceptance and approval without examination of the evidence.
- (3) **Transfer.** Carries the respect and authority of something respected to something else to make the latter respected. Also works with something that is disrespected to make the latter rejected.

- (4) **Testimonial.** Consists in having some respected or hated person say that a given idea or program, product or person is good or bad.
- (5) **Plain Folks.** The method by which a speaker attempts to convince the audience that ... [they, the speaker] or [their] ideas are good because they are 'of the people,' and 'the plain folks'.
- (6) **Card Stacking.** Involves the selection and use of the facts or falsehoods, illustrations or distractions, and logical or illogical statements to give the best or the worst possible case for an idea, program, person or product.
- (7) **Bandwagon.** Has as its theme 'everybody—at least all of us—is doing it!' and thereby tries to convince the members of a group that their peers are accepting the program and that we should all jump on the bandwagon rather than be left out.

The bulletin also noted the following:

Observe that in all of these devices our emotion is the stuff with which propagandists work. Without it they are helpless; with it, harnessing it to their purposes, they can make us glow with pride or burn with hatred, they can make us zealots on behalf of the programme the spouse' (IPA 1937, as cited by [Jowett and O'Donnell 2015](#): 258).

Of particular note was the propaganda analysts' recognition that propagandizing involves seeking to elicit particular emotional responses from an audience. That is, successful propaganda can be thought about as information that wins the battle for a population's hearts and minds ([Jowett and O'Donnell 2015](#)). The capacity for propagandizing in relation to criminological subject matter, then, is easily imagined, given the close relationship between emotionality and the topics of crime and justice ([Jacobsen and Walklate 2019](#)).

Although the IPA had considerable success in disseminating these seven devices to large swathes of the American public, their usefulness was ultimately undermined by several factors. Perhaps most significant among these were concerns that the seven devices 'promoted an unhealthy universal skepticism' ([Sproule 2001](#): 140). More widely, the work of the original propaganda analysts also fell victim to criticism, suppression and subjugation when the social sciences shifted towards more positivist methods. Propaganda analysis gradually became overshadowed by mass communication studies, which offered a paradigm that was more oriented towards methodological and statistical concerns, was more useful for policy makers and deemed 'political inconspicuous' ([Sproule, 1987](#): 68). By contrast, the questions raised by propaganda analysts sought to disrupt the status quo and offer ways to reform or change it. Consequently, their work and 'publications increasingly were seen as non-scientific and academically peripheral when judged according to newer understandings of the term science' (p. 70).

Nevertheless, a rich body of studies of propaganda continues in the field of mass communications studies to the present day, and a number of useful analytical frameworks have continued to emerge over the last two decades (for example see useful contributions in [Auerbach and Castronovo \(2013\)](#); [Stanley 2015](#) and [Baines et al. 2020](#)). Before going on to discuss the application of propaganda analysis to criminology, we first need to further explore the nature and mechanisms of propaganda, drawing on some of the foregoing literature in the field of propaganda studies.

## THE NATURE AND MECHANISMS OF PROPAGANDA

The activity of spreading propaganda initially referred to preventing the dissemination of false reports and a commitment to furthering 'the Truth' (in religious terms). It was during and after

World War I that propaganda took on more negative connotations in English-speaking countries due to the revelation of its role in falsifying information during both world wars (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013).

There is a wide range of definitions of propaganda in scholarly literature (see [Marlin 2013](#)). [Jowett and O'Donnell \(2015: 7\)](#), for example, define propaganda as 'the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist'. For our purposes, we adopt a definition of propaganda proposed by philosopher Randal Marlin, as it aligns with the way we have been thinking about it in relation to criminology. This definition identifies propaganda as an:

organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective judgement ([Marlin 2013: 12](#)).

This definition offers a useful overarching context for examining issues such as 'fake news'. It is particularly relevant to thinking about such problems within the expansive field of online media, where information can be easily spread and shared without due diligence around its provenance. In recent decades, a wealth of research and literature has erupted on the way propaganda can flow through mass communication channels ([Baines et al. 2020](#)) or through cultural forms (including culture wars) and news media outlets ([Burnett 1989](#); [Chomsky 2004](#)). Many of these contributions offer insights into not only the different forms propaganda can take, but also—to build on [Stanley \(2015\)](#)—*how they work*: the mechanisms that explain how propagandistic statements propagate, inculcate or deflate beliefs. There is, for example, a considerable literature on the psychology of propaganda and the impact and use of persuasion techniques ([Pratkanis and Aronson 2001](#); [Jowett and O'Donnell 2015](#)). These literatures are fruitful and their implications and permutations are vast. Here, we focus on just one particularly insightful account, that of American philosopher, Jason [Stanley \(2015\)](#).

Drawing on the tools of formal semantics and pragmatics, Stanley's model examines three key linguistic concepts to understand how propaganda works: [Stalnaker's \(2002\)](#) notion of the *common ground* of a conversation, and [Potts' \(2005\)](#) concepts of at-issue content, and not-at-issue content. The common ground of a conversation refers to presupposed content that is taken for granted between interlocutors ([Stalnaker 2002: 701](#)). At-issue content refers to the primary proposition asserted in a statement. By contrast, not-at-issue content refers to by-the-way information and presuppositions contained in a statement. Whereas at-issue content proposes content to be added to the common ground of a conversation, not-at-issue content is *directly* added to the common ground of a conversation (see [AnderBois et al. 2015](#)). This, for [Stanley \(2015\)](#), is what makes not-at-issue content ripe for propaganda. Through repeated association, a concept can become imbued with not-at-issue content that is presupposed rather than explicitly communicated. Since this not-at-issue content is presupposed and constitutes the social meaning of a word, it 'cannot be cancelled' or directly challenged ([Stanley 2015: 139](#)). As Stanley (138) explains,

When propagandists use repeated association between words and images, they are forming connections that serve as the basis of conventional meaning. Typically, the conventional meaning is not-at-issue content ... At some point, the repeated associations are part of the meaning, the not-at-issue content.

These analyses are in keeping with the devices set out by the IPA in the late 1930s. The sleight of hand associated with imbuing a concept with not-at-issue content is similar to the devices of

'transfer' mentioned in the discussion of the seven propaganda devices above. As Marlin (2013: 187) writes, 'for propaganda to be successful, a targeted audience must not recognize what is communicated as propaganda.' With its focus on the introduction of not-at-issue linguistic content, Stanley's (2015) model of propaganda offers a precise and detailed approach to understanding the covert nature of propaganda. This not-at-issue content can take numerous forms, from slurs (Quaranto and Stanley 2021) or 'name calling', code words and covert dogwhistles (Torices 2021; Quaranto 2022) to the 'glittering generalities' propaganda studies have long recognized. By using these techniques, normative claims can be intimated without being asserted outright (Quaranto and Stanley 2021: 130).

Whereas it is assumed that cooperative communication serves both the speaker's and the listener's interests, propaganda, Quaranto and Stanley, (2021: 129) write, 'aims to further the propagandist's interests only'. Stanley emphasizes two key ways interests can be furthered through propaganda: through either supporting particular ideals or beliefs or through undermining them. Based on this distinction, Stanley (2015: 53) differentiates between what he terms *supporting propaganda* and *undermining propaganda*, which he respectively defines as follows:

*Supporting Propaganda*: A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals yet is of a kind that tends to increase the realization of those very ideals by either emotional or other nonrational means.

*Undermining Propaganda*: A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals.

In undermining propaganda, a virtuous ideal is employed 'in the service of a goal that is inconsistent with it' (Quaranto and Stanley 2021: 126). In supporting propaganda, by contrast, an explicitly identified ideal or goal is promoted through 'mov[ing] emotion behind' it. As we will show, both supporting and undermining propaganda are evident in criminological issues and distinguishing between them helps us account for the goals propagandistic statements are in service to.

If ideological analysis provides us with a toolkit for examining the values, beliefs and assumptions embedded in a text, practice or institution, then the work of Stanley and other scholars concerned with propaganda analysis offers us a toolkit for examining one set of mechanisms actors may use to propagate ideology. We stress, *one* set of mechanisms. Ideology is, of course, purveyed through a variety of mechanisms, just as one's susceptibility to a propagandistic message is shaped by a variety of emotional, cultural and political factors. Sectional and material interests, social relations and grievance all shape how we respond to propagandistic statements.

One caveat of the above considerations is that we cannot make *a priori* judgements about the significance of propaganda in achieving an end. There will be certain situations in which propaganda does play an outsized role in sustaining (harmful) practices and ideologies. There will be others in which propaganda fails outright. We are, therefore, not arguing that propaganda and propagandizing alone prop up or perpetuate social structures and ideology. To make such a claim would veer close to a 'manipulated consensus' model of culture, wherein powerful actors coerce the majority to adhere to a common ideological or cultural system (Archer 1996). Offering both social structures and human agency an impoverished analytical role, such an account would preclude us from examining how the interplay between social structures, ideational content and human agency produce, replicate or change social practices (Archer 1996). We must understand propagandistic statements *in context*, and this context is not just the stuff of discourse and ideation, but also material relations, technology, agency and reflexivity.

To that end, it is helpful to invoke Woolley's (2023) three foci of propaganda research: research examining the content of propaganda, research examining the impact of propaganda and research examining the production of propaganda. Each of these foci has a part to play in

criminological examinations of propaganda. However, regardless of the focus taken within such examinations several cautions and qualifiers are important. Firstly, propaganda is far from the only conduit of ideology. In drawing on the tools of propaganda studies, we need to avoid offering reductive accounts that treat individuals as ideological dupes, and ideology as a product of propaganda. While we must avoid accounts of ideology grounded in economic functionalism (Wood et al. 2020; 2021), we also must avoid accounts that treat ideology as the sole province of discourse. Secondly, though the examples we are about to explore in this article have primarily involved propaganda used in the service of harmful ends, it is important to emphasize that propaganda can be used to support both projects that support well-being and projects that undermine it (Stanley 2015). Further, though propaganda aims to circumvent the rational process of critical thinking, its content is not necessarily false. That is, not all information spread through propagandizing is disinformation. Both the information and the source of that information can both be accurate in some instances. What makes something worthy of the label propaganda is its intent to ‘obscure the identity of the message originator, thus creating a high degree of credibility for both message and apparent source’ (Jowett and O’Donnell 2015: 21). The power of propagandizing techniques lies in their capacity to instill information into hearts and minds without critical examination of the truth or provenance of that information.

We now move on to describing three areas of criminological interest to demonstrate the need for and benefit of propaganda analysis in criminology.

### THREE CRIMINOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS OF PROPAGANDA ANALYSIS

#### Ecofascism

In recent years, discourses of the far-right have weaponized environmentalism with widely funded propaganda strategies to advance anti-immigration, and racist and misogynist causes (Taylor 2019). This radical conservative ult-right dialogue, commonly referred to as ‘ecofascism’ exploits topical issues associated with climate change to seek relevance and influence and to advance political movements in conservative social media (Moore and Roberts 2022). For example, in 2019, Patrick Crusius allegedly shot dead 22 civilians in El Paso, United States, whilst declaring himself as an ‘ecofascist’ because he was ‘seeking to challenge the “environmental warfare” of immigration’ (Hughes et al, 2022: 997).

The origins of ecofascism are found in the Nazi ideologies of the 1930s that espoused blood and soil with Reich nationalism as an opposition to ‘immigrants’ and other ‘social impurities’ that contaminated, constrained and curtailed German society (Biehl and Staudenmaier 1985). The Nazi’s were especially well-versed in propagandizing techniques. Notably, through Minister for Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, they disseminated messages through print and radio media and saturated educational institutions and public spaces with imagery, content and slogans that perpetuated the evils of population diversity as the antithesis of grassroots values that were, in turn, promoted as the pinnacle of an insular ethnic national pride (Staudenmaier 2011).

Today, contemporary far-right extremist movements that promote antisemitism, racism, homophobia and other platforms of hate, frame their justifications within notions of ecology; a return to nature, where the environment is used to embed and propagate anti-egalitarian views (Taylor 2019). Hence, refugees and immigrants are cast as ‘foreign species’ or ‘pollutants’ that accelerate environmental despoliation (Richards et al. 2023). This is an emerging position that influences and shapes the far-right extremities of party politics with emotional yet unfounded notions of environmental destruction through an invasion of migrants and their alien cultures and ideologies (cf. Richards 2021).

This is a propaganda adopted by ‘ecofacists’ who leverage and weaponize the perils of climate change to apportion blame and responsibility of planetary decline on multiculturalism,



immigration and progressive left politics (Moore and Roberts 2022; Martin and Hernandez 2021). The apparent ecological conscience of the Far-Right re-packages ultra-extremist discourses premised on hate, intolerance and bigotry and repositions it within the mainstream dialogue as a legitimate and justified reasoning to explain environmental ills (Collins 2022). This is modern-day fascism, with all its violent, oppressive and totalitarian doctrines, with an environmental twist. The environment, notably, its decline and impending dangers, provide the impetus to recruit and harness new followers to an extremist cause underpinned by racism, sexism and far-right ideologies characterized by intolerance and discrimination (Lawton 2019).

The fusion of neo-Nazism with eco-fascism is gaining global momentum with increasing expressions of extreme violence (Szenes 2021). There are examples of how this right-extremist ideology has manifested into devastating outcomes. For example, in March 2019, a lone gunman murdered 51 people and injured a further 40 at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand (BBC News 2020). The shooter chronicled his values in a written diary stating: 'I am an ethno-nationalist eco-fascist'... Ethnic autonomy for all peoples with a focus on the preservation of nature, and the natural order'. (Lamoureux 2020). However, far-right extremists are moving beyond violence that targets ethnic minorities and religious groups; to focus on the disruption of telecommunications and infrastructures of energy provision. This attack on 'the system' is a new form of intimidation, not directed at specific peoples but at physical entities that sustain normal and progressive social functioning. Yet, the premise of such acts of sabotage and the resultant inconvenience and chaos echoes a familiar mantra, notably actions taken to preserve and protect human and non-human life alike (Loadenthal 2022). Ecofacism is a growing movement of extreme violence often referred to as a 'tangible and present danger' (Dominguez et al. 2022). This is an area of major criminological concern. Notably, the ecofacist movement is an attempt to utilise the issue of planetary decline and the associated fears this is causing to propagate hate, discrimination and violence. Such tactics are garnering support within extreme right-ring circles and pose significant security threats, notably, for minority groups and those seeking more progressive, inclusive eco-friendly politics and the promotion of diverse societies.

### Copoganda

The idea of 'copaganda' sets out the ways that propagandizing techniques are used to promote, endorse and glorify police work and to justify, excuse and legitimate police malpractice and illegal activity. Though numerous scholars have used the term *copaganda*, few have defined it. Most of the definitions that are commonly used have been set out by journalists rather than academics. Johnson (2016: np), for example, defines copaganda as 'any news story that uncritically advances a police department's image or helps undermine reform efforts' or as 'pieces of media that are so scarily disconnected from the reality of cops that they end up serving as offbeat recruitment ads'. Writing for *The Ringer*, Charity (2018:np) defines copaganda as 'media efforts to flatter police officers and spare them from skeptical coverage'. In one of the few definitions of copaganda offered by an academic, Bernabo (2022: 488) defines the phenomenon as 'stories [that] promote supportive images of police and undermine efforts at systemic reform'.

One problem faced by these definitions is that of intention. As our foregoing review of propaganda studies emphasized, propaganda can be understood as an *organized* attempt to affect belief or action through circumventing or suppressing an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective judgement (Marlin 2013: 12). Consequently, information that is not intended to circumvent informed and reflective judgement should not be considered propaganda. In the above definitions of copaganda, propaganda is conflated with *ideology*. As scholars from Eagleton (1991) to Žižek (1989/2019) have emphasized, ideology often operates unconsciously; it is propagated not only through deliberate and organized propagandizing, but unconsciously through a variety of social practices. To tally with the insights of propaganda

studies, a compelling definition of copaganda needs to avoid being so all encompassing that it becomes a catch-all for any media content that presents a positive account of policing. Thus, by adapting [Marlin's \(2013: 12\)](#) definition of propaganda, we propose the subsequent definition for copaganda:

Copaganda is the organized attempt through communication to inculcate adulatory and/or uncritical attitudes towards formal policing and/or specific police departments using techniques that circumvent or suppress individuals' adequately informed, rational, reflective judgement.

To date, scholars have examined three key propagators of copaganda: (1) News media ([Soderberg and Friedman 2022](#)); (2) Entertainment media ([Shanahan and Wall 2021](#); [Tsika 2021](#); [Slakoff et al. 2022](#)); and (3) Police departments themselves ([Schneider 2021](#); [Wood and McGovern 2021](#)).

Within news media, the commonly employed phrase 'officer involved shooting' has been criticised as copaganda for its use of passive voice ([Soderberg and Friedman 2022](#)). Through passive voice, 'officer-involved shooting' allows for listeners to be informed of 'acts without agents' ([Lamb 1991](#)). This linguistic approach to describing such events diffuses responsibility and refers to 'offences without a clearly delineated offender' (see [Thompson 2020: 1403](#)). This is notably in stark contrast to how most other types of shooting incidents are described, which are more often agentive and, thereby, accusatory in their phrasing. Further, we can point to the the 'bad apples' narrative in news media coverage of police misconduct as another common form of copaganda. In presenting the overwhelming majority of police misconduct as the result of 'a few bad apples', such news reporting represents misdirection: 'communicative strategies that draw attention away from the true causes or nature of an issue' ([Thompson 2020: 1403](#)).

There are many examples of police departments, news media and entertainment media communicating not-at-issue social meanings about policing through repeated associations. To take just one example; consider NSW Police's use of Internet memes, humour and cute images of police animals in its self-described 'meme strategy' ([Wood 2020](#)). When NSW Police's social media accounts regularly post images of 'cute' police service animals, 'NSW Police' is imbued with the not-at-issue content of friendliness, and approachability. As an aesthetic category (see [Ngai 2012](#)), cuteness can also be 'weaponized' to elicit a strong emotional response from individuals that circumvents their informed, rational or reflective judgement. Such images are propagandistic as they use emotional means to, as the architects of the meme strategy themselves state, 'create a positive image for the Force (we are human)' ([YouthSense 2017: np](#)). Such copaganda therefore represents a form of what [Stanley \(2015: 53\)](#) terms *supporting propaganda* or in other words, discourse that seeks to realize an end or explicitly provided ideal 'by either emotional or other nonrational means'.

Yet not all examples of copaganda represent propagandizing attempts to garner support for police organizations. Insofar as it stifles critique of police, copaganda can be an example of what [Stanley \(2015: 53\)](#) terms undermining propaganda, which contributes to public discourses that are 'presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet [are] of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals'. Importantly, such undermining propaganda need not be intended to undermine this ideal – the propagators of such propaganda may, [Stanley \(2015: 43\)](#) argues, be entirely sincere. For example, when the 'thin blue line' between 'law and crime' and 'order and chaos' (see [Wall 2020](#)) is invoked to undermine police reform efforts and garner support for police militarization and other harmful policing practices, we see a form of undermining copaganda in action. Through promoting an us-versus-them mentality, and undermining reform efforts to reduce police corruption, institutional racism and excessive use of force, such thin blue line copaganda appeals to law and order only to erode these very ideals.

### Astroturfing and Greenwashing

In this final section that explores a site for criminological propaganda analysis, we outline the deceptive and corrupt corporate practices of creating and orchestrating false public opinions through the examples of astroturfing and greenwashing (Beder, 1998). We focus on how techniques and strategies to ‘mask’ the sponsors of constructed green initiative narratives are concealed. Corporate and government entities deceptively bolster their environmental credentials, often utilizing public relations companies to persuade publics of their ‘green’ conscientiousness. The use of sophisticated ‘spin’ acts to propagate favourable imagery is used, whilst at the same time, disguising policies and practices that exacerbate environmental despoliation.

Greenwashing and astroturfing are important components in the obfuscation of harm pertaining to climate change and environmental degradation, and propaganda studies provide a valuable toolkit with which to interrogate these practices. Here we expand on how propaganda is adopted by those in corporate and political power to subvert, enable or actively endorse environmental harm and crime via what are known as ‘astroturfing’ and ‘greenwashing’.

*Astroturfing* refers to the artificial construction of social movements that give the illusion of grassroots engagement with an issue, concealing sponsorship and funding by vested interests (Lyon and Maxwell 2004). Mix and Waldo (2016: 126) define astroturf campaigns in terms of two fundamental characteristics: ‘(1) sponsorship by an elite corporate or political entity, and (2) the use of fraudulent claims of support by groups of constituencies’. It is important to point out that astroturf movements should be theorized on a continuum with legitimate grassroots groups, as there is often a degree of grassroots engagement that can evolve fluidly over the lifespan of a campaign or group’s existence (Wear 2014; Lits 2020).

The term ‘astroturfing’—alluding to synthetic grass product AstroTurf as a counter-symbol to ‘grassroots’ activism—is said to originate with the 1986 comments of United States Senator, Lloyd Bentsen, who denounced efforts by the Texas liquor industry to mimic public outcry against greater regulation (Lits 2020). Bentsen is quoted to have said he can ‘tell the difference between grassroots and AstroTurf’ (Walker, 2014: 33). While this might have been the case for the Senator, a wealth of scholarship has shown the increasing sophistication with which astroturfing has been operationalized in the context of environmental and climate policymaking (Cho et al. 2011; Mix and Waldo 2016; Lits 2020). This correlates with the increasing institutionalization of astroturfing as a service within the public relations (PR) industry (Lits 2020; Brulle and Werthman 2021). While PR industry involvement is not a definitional prerequisite (Mix and Waldo 2016), research has shown that, of firms involved in climate politics, approximately 40% engaged in astroturfing practices (Walker 2014; Brulle and Werthman 2021). McNutt and Boland (2007) also emphasize that astroturfing is especially common in the context of environmental politics.

We point to two examples of astroturfing in the environmental and climate context that feature potential inroads for analysis via propaganda studies. Firstly, Cho et al. (2011: 571) argued that ‘people who used astroturf websites became more uncertain about the causes of global warming and humans’ role in the phenomenon’. Even when the astroturfed relationship was revealed to participants—for instance, that a website was sponsored by ExxonMobil—denialism still increased following exposure (Cho et al. 2011: 581). This notable finding indicates the type of circumvention of the capacity for rational assessment which propaganda studies highlights (Marlin 2013). Wear (2014) examined the populist politics of the ‘Convoy of No Confidence’, an astroturfed campaign against carbon emissions reduction efforts in Australia in 2011. While this research could not definitively characterize the demonstration as completely astroturfed, the mobilization of populist politics by a group with astroturfed dimensions is significant from the perspective of propaganda studies.

Secondly, but broadly, astroturfing as an institutionalized service in the PR industry resembles closely what Stanley (2015: 55) describes as a ‘vehicle of propaganda’. A key component of

how propaganda functions in liberal democracies, a vehicle of propaganda is a 'site or mechanism for the production of propaganda ... [and] an institution that represents itself as defined by a certain political ideal, yet whose practice tends to undermine the realization of that ideal' (Stanley 2015: 55–56). Astroturfing leverages the liberal ideal that democratic and popular support legitimizes policymaking. By artificially constructing the illusion of such support, the practice clearly undermines the ideal. This is supported by Mix and Waldo (2016) and Cho et al. (2011) who respectively emphasize that the practice can undermine democracy, specifically noting that it damages legitimate grassroots campaigns by making publics more cautious and sceptical about the authenticity of front-line groups.

*Greenwashing* entails deceptively leveraging public concerns about the climate and environment for advertising, marketing, PR and image-maintenance by actors whose records on these issues does not correspond to the image projected (de Freitas Netto et al. 2020). While there is no unified definition of greenwashing (Lyon and Montgomery 2015), Delmas and Burbano (2011: 65) define the practice as the 'intersection of two firm behaviours: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance'. Practices that are considered greenwashing constitute a very broad tent with a multitude of specific techniques, strategies or 'sins' (TerraChoice 2010). De Freitas Netto et al. (2020) distinguish between two orientations: firm-level and product/service-level greenwashing. The former aims at deceptively improving consumer perceptions of an organization while the latter misleadingly advertises the environmental performance of a product or service (de Freitas Netto et al. 2020).

Common at the product/service level are straightforward falsities presented to erroneously convince consumers that a product/service is environmentally friendly. This ranges from the 'sin of fibbing', which describes claims which are simply false, to other more elaborate techniques such as 'the sin of worshipping false labels' (TerraChoice 2010). This latter strategy refers to the labelling of products with imagery that masquerades as formal environmental certification when no such accreditation has been awarded. While these practices impact informed consumer choice, they do not circumvent or suppress the capacity for rational assessment (Marlin 2013). If the consumer learnt of the false claim they would be—cognitively speaking—empowered to assess the situation accurately. Nevertheless, the aggregate of greenwashing activity has been shown to shape public capacities to assess the environmental claims of industry actors and thereby influence behaviour on a mass scale. For instance, greenwashing has been shown to produce information overload for consumers, which in turn increases generalized scepticism about products and companies that claim to be environmentally friendly (Chen and Chang 2013; Gosselt et al. (2019)?). Research has also shown that people are unable to identify greenwashing in advertisements, with participants often perceiving non-deceptive experiment prompts to be more deceptive than those featuring greenwashing (Fernandes et al. 2020). This means that truthful environmental claims inspired less trust than false claims (Fernandes et al. 2020; Eng et al. 2021).

A notable instance of firm-level greenwashing that crystallizes how corporate actors can propagandistically exploit existing ideological tendencies in society is the example of the carbon footprint calculator. This application allows users to input information about their daily routines, purportedly measuring the amount of carbon emitted by those activities (Solnit 2021). The technology was the outcome of a partnership between oil company, British Petroleum (now BP) and public relations firm, Ogilvy and Mather, unveiled in 2004 (Solnit 2021). Created as part of the wider 'Beyond Petroleum' advertising campaign, the term 'carbon footprint' has now become ubiquitous in climate debates, with the United States' Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and many others creating versions of the calculator (Brulle and Werthman 2021; Kaufman 2020).

A brief analysis suggests that the primary attitude intended to be inculcated by the application is that responsibility for carbon emissions should centre on the consumption habits of

individuals, rather than the operations of industry. Ideologically, this attitude reflects the conventional logic of neoliberal economics, preferring the free-market mechanism of consumer demand over regulatory intervention (Harvey 2007). Propaganda studies allow us to explicate the mechanisms by which these ideological assumptions are transmitted and cemented, in this instance, via the communicative application of the carbon footprint calculator. Within the context of the 'Beyond Petroleum' advertising campaign, the at-issue content of the communicative operation of which the calculator was but one part (Kaufman 2020), should be viewed as the environmental performance of BP. As a propagandizing technique this can be seen as form of 'card stacking' where the selection and use of information aim to show the corporation in the best possible light, despite the evidence. Moreover, the consumption habits of users of the application can be interpreted as not-at-issue content, added directly to the presupposed 'common ground' between interlocutors (the user of the application and BP/Ogilvy Mather). Rather than proposing that individual consumption habits be added to the taken-for-granted content of the discussion, the application presupposes this directly, semantically positioning the user to instantly do the same.

It is beyond the purview of this article to assess the efficacy of the carbon footprint calculator in producing specific outcomes, and these would likely be too diffuse and amorphous to measure in any case. However, it is clear that the application constitutes an organized and intentional effort to covertly—and we would argue, propagandistically—foster deleterious inferences about climate change policy amongst the public. Namely, that industrial actors like BP bare less responsibility for reducing emissions than the public, and correspondingly, that policy interventions ought to be aimed at individual consumers rather than industry.

## COMBINING THE INSIGHTS OF CRITICAL CRIMINOLOGICAL AND PROPAGANDA STUDIES

The three cases above illustrated ways that critical criminology has already engaged with a range of topics in common with propaganda studies. It has used different, but compatible analytical lenses. Whilst we argue that the insights of propaganda analysis are able to refine and more tightly focus the critical criminological gaze, criminology has already produced much relevant work that recognizes the strengths of voices of the powerful (Hall *et al.* 1978); Reiman and Leighton, 2016), the hidden harms and mystifications of dominant discourses (Box, 1983) and the production of deviant knowledge (Walters, 2003). To extend this work, there are spaces for fruitful cross-pollination with propaganda studies. Table 1 below includes three cross-over examples that demonstrate ways in which propaganda studies and criminology have already tread similar intellectual ground. Each of the areas outlined can be explored in greater depth to refine even more precise examples of propagandizing, as indicated in the Table.

As Table 1 shows, contemporary developments in the areas of 'fake news', online culture wars, and the increased use of Bots and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in crime and criminal justice all call for types of analyses that will make it simpler to spot techniques of propaganda and to identify the ideologies behind them. Critical and cultural criminology have long examined ideological rhetoric, its role in shaping criminalization and criminal justice policy and the reproduction of structural harms (Coleman *et al.* 2009; Box 1983). What then, does propaganda studies add to this long tradition of criminological scholarship? As Quaranto and Stanley (2021: 126) explain, 'The study of propaganda involves understanding the communicative processes in persuading people by bypassing rationality'. Through its insights into these communicative processes, propaganda studies provide a toolkit for examining mechanisms of manipulation that generate support for an ideology, or engender doubt or ignorance about competing sources of information and beliefs. Understanding how these mechanisms of manipulation work are

Table 1. Spaces for criminological interventions in studying the production, content and impact of propaganda

Issue	Key questions	Examples	Sites of cross-pollination
The propaganda-crime causation nexus	How have actors utilized propaganda to generate support for ideologies, policies and political economic orders that are criminogenic and zemitogenic?	Neoliberal propaganda generating support undermining non-economic social institutions, leading to social atomization, excessive individualism, anomie and instrumental crime (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2012). Poor-blaming and poor shaming through neoliberal propaganda (Barton and Davis, 2018a).	Synthesizing Institutional Anomie Theory and Herman and Chomsky's (2010) propaganda model to understand the political economic drivers of news media propaganda legitimizing criminogenic neoliberal policies.
Corporate crime	How have corporations and governments utilized propaganda to engage in image-management and draw attention away from corporate crimes and harms?	Amazon's use of bots and sockpuppets posing as Amazon workers to undermine unionization efforts and calls for improved working conditions (Sainato, 2021).	Analyzing the extent to which propaganda informs public support for criminogenic ideologies, social systems and policies. Examining news media's complicity in spreading corporate propaganda that hinders public awareness of corporate crimes and reinforces corporate power. Examining the discursive strategies employed by corporations to promote environmentally harmful activities.
Criminalization processes	How - and to what extent - has propaganda informed the criminalization of particular groups and behaviours? How - and to what extent - has propaganda informed the <i>undercriminalization</i> of particular groups and behaviours?	The criminalization of whistle-blowers. The racialized criminalization of migrant groups. Manufacturing support for punitive criminal justice measures. Diverting attention away from systemic issues or root causes of criminal behaviour.	Examining the ways consumers and workers interests are pitted against one another, detracting from harms caused by problematic working conditions/labour practices. Border criminology – examining the use of propaganda techniques, such as framing, code-words and emotional appeals in policy narratives surrounding immigration and border control. Vignette studies examining the impact of code-word use on individuals' views on criminalizing asylum seekers and other racialized groups.

critical to exposing the instances when propagandist techniques are being used, how to spot them and how to dig deeper to find out what the actual evidence or current state of knowledge in a particular field reveals.

Another key area of cross-pollination pertains to the mediation of propaganda. In this article, we have focused primarily on propaganda's mechanisms of persuasion. To examine the impact of particular instances of propaganda, however, criminology also needs to analyze how propaganda proliferates. One way to do this is to situate propaganda within specific mediascapes or media ecologies and examine its content and vehicles of dissemination. Of particular note is the advent of new computational vehicles of propaganda, such as bots, sockpuppet accounts and partisan nano-influencers, that anonymize and/or the production of misinformation and other forms of information pollution (see Woolley, 2023). Here, there is space for an intersection between propaganda studies, and recent developments in digital and cultural criminology on the mediatization of cultural representations of crime, justice and harm (Powell et al., 2018; Ferrell et al., 2008).

As Hall et al. (1978: 59) influentially argued, news media frequently grant criminal justice actors the ability to establish, 'primary definitions' of crime-related issues, which 'set[...] the limit for all subsequent discussion by framing what the problem is'. Recent work in propaganda studies can augment our understanding of such primary definitions. It attunes us to the persuasive techniques employed by primary definers that frame issues. Such work can help us understand why certain primary definitions stick and others do not, but just as importantly, it highlights additional ways actors can influence beliefs without proposing overt primary definitions. Contra Hall et al.'s concept of primary definitions—which 'clearly delineate' the dimensions of 'an issue of public concern' (1978: 75)—propaganda often does not set the limit for subsequent discussions by overtly framing what the problem is or clearly delineating its dimensions. Rather, as Stanley (2015) emphasizes, propagandizing asserts normative claims covertly through intimation without outright assertion. Actors can, in other words, shape public views on crime in a far more covert fashion. Code words, covert dog whistles and glittering generalities can equally serve to shape beliefs without overtly defining the issue at hand or saying the quiet part out loud.

## REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS—NEW HORIZONS FOR CRIMINOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND IMPACT

Though 'propaganda' often pops up in passing in criminological and zemiological publications (Davis and Arrigo 2021; Collins 2022; Davis and White 2022), few studies in the discipline have specifically explored propaganda (though see Garrison 2004; Sunde et al. 2021; and Schneider 2021). Understanding the mechanisms of propaganda may augment frameworks criminologists have proposed and developed to examine ideology and subjectification. For example, in studying the fomentation of ignorance about an array of harms (see Barton et al. 2018; Walters 2018), there is great scope for cross-pollination between propaganda studies and agnotology: the study of culturally and politically induced ignorance or doubt (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). Criminologists and zemiologists have recently turned to the insights of agnotology to understand the key role ignorance can play in generating harm (Barton and Davis 2018b). As we have argued here, it is important not to reduce public sensibilities to some version of 'manipulated consensus'. Careful propaganda analysis, discussed and presented in the right fora may have the capacity to dispel ignorance and doubt amongst the general population. Thus, propaganda analysis provides more than just a toolkit for criminologists to identify mechanisms of manipulation in academic publications. A key role propaganda analysis may play for criminologists harkens back to one of the original aims of propaganda studies:

providing non-academic publics with the tools to identify propaganda. Providing different publics with easy-to-use devices that identify common linguistic devices used in law-and-order and zemiological propaganda is one way criminologists may promote a better politics of crime, harm and justice. Consequently, we see a role for propaganda analysis in several different modes of public criminology. Open access online publications, public seminars and carefully chosen media allies all provide platforms from which to engage the public in discussions about crime, harm and justice topics that are vulnerable to propagandizing. Propaganda analysis may supplement the ‘myth-busting’ work commonly undertaken in criminologists’ news-making engagements (Wood et al. 2022). On its own, myth-busting is a Sisyphean task. Confronted with opposing evidence, bad-faith actors and demagogues can double down and bolster misdirection. Moreover, as contemporary propaganda analysis emphasizes, such actors often propagandize through code words, and repeated associations that avoid saying the quiet part out loud, making it difficult to challenge such claims through debunking and myth-busting alone (Stanley 2015). Coupling myth-busting with propaganda analysis could enable criminologists to explain not only why the sub-text—and its’ not-at-issue content—is erroneous but also how it compels, instils doubt or misdirects through mechanisms of manipulation. To rework a Chinese proverb: debunk a propagandistic claim, and you’ll raise a person’s awareness of propaganda for a day. Teach a person to identify propaganda and you’ll raise their awareness of it for a lifetime.

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