

# Vira B. Whitehouse & the U.S. Committee on Public Information

by Barb Howe



The word propaganda has “an ominous clang in many minds” as one early 20th century political scientist described it back in the 1920s. It wasn’t always that way. Up until fairly recently the Latin word was only used in the biological sense, as in to propagate a species. The first use of the word in a non-biological sense came in the 17th century when the Catholic Church founded the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) to combat the rising threat of Protestantism while also training missionaries to convert the heathens of the New (ly discovered by Europeans) World. That propaganda was something that states do, rather than biological species or religions, was a fairly new idea, and it arose in the early 20th century partly as a response to the social effects of modern industrial capitalism (which new communications technologies were bringing to light), and partly as a response to the first World War in which it was developed as a tool of foreign policy. In both cases, at the root of this controversial political strategy lies a certain kind of (late 19th century) Idealism as embodied in the Progressive Era (1896 to 1917).

The Progressive Era can be seen as a reaction to rising economic inequality and the urban poverty of unregulated industrialized capitalism. Mega corporations like US Steel controlled monopolies over major industries, keeping wages low and prices high. Many people at the time thought the best way to prevent such social injustices was to expose them to public scrutiny. Muckraking journalists like Ida Tarbell and Upton Sinclair took pride in writing popular exposes of corporate and political corruption, calling for social and political reforms and a greater role for the state to regulate market excesses. The independent media became one of the main tools needed for Democracy to thrive in the modern Industrial Age. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis wrote, in 1913, about the disinfecting effects of sunlight, which he meant as a metaphor for transparency. (The rest of the quote goes “and the electric light the most

efficient policeman.”) Whitehouse had to suffer the indignity of reading in the press that it was her *husband* who was appointed, and she was tagging along to study children’s and women’s issues in Bern.

According to a book on the history of the CPI by John Maxwell Hamilton, *The New York Times* described Vira as “one of the most beautiful and girlish of the young matrons in society” (Hamilton’s “Manipulating the Masses,” 2020, p. 272). She was 42 at the time. A graduate of Newcomb College, part of Tulane University in New Orleans, the appointment of Whitehouse to lead war communications in Europe provoked outrage amongst some men at the time, including the US ambassador to Switzerland who complained to President Wilson that Whitehouse was “obstinate” and “personally hostile to me” (p. 276). Nevertheless, Whitehouse withstood the intense criticism and pressure to step down. She wrote to Wilson’s secretary that she “should like to cry from the heights of the necessity and economy of a liberal policy of education publicity (which we must no longer call propaganda) in both allied and neutral countries” (p.278). She was granted a diplomatic passport and two letters of recommendation from President Wilson.

The goal of the Committee’s work in Europe was not just to help the US win the war but to lay the groundwork for Wilson’s vision for a just peace and a progressive future. His baby, the League of Nations idea, would become the first international organization whose goal was to provide states with an alternative to war. Wilson could never convince Congress to join the League however, and while the fledgling organization failed to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War, it still paved the way for the international organizations we recognize today, the building blocks of the post-war liberal world order.

Was the CPI really doing propaganda, or was this merely the first US department of publicity? The distinction between the two lies in the eye of the beholder. In subsequent decades, during the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, the distinction was simple: whatever the other side did was propaganda or “psychological warfare”; what we do is either “ideological work” (in Russia or China) or “public relations” (in the West). Whitehouse was either one of the first state propagandists or one of the first PR executives. Either way, her work was very influential. She and the other progressive members of the Committee on Public Information which was disbanded by Congress as soon as the war was over, believed they were not only helping to win the war but literally helping in Wilson’s words, to “make the world safe for democracy.”

Like other modern democracies, the US has struggled with where to draw the line between publicity and propaganda, but in the first decades of the 20th century, the purifying effects of “pitiless publicity” led no less a figure than H.G. Wells to weigh in on the desirability (or at least acceptance of) the new science of publicity. Wells was supportive, seeing propaganda as crucial to building public support for democratic institutions: “All human institutions are made of propaganda, sustained by propaganda, and perish when it ceases” he wrote. “They must be continually explained and re-explained to the young and negligent. And for this new world of democracy and the League of Nations to which all reasonable men are looking, there must needs be the greatest propaganda.” These could’ve been Vira’s thoughts exactly.

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efficient policeman.”)

Woodrow Wilson, the first and, to this day, still the only US President to hold a PhD in political science, embodied that early 20th century optimism that put great faith in two things: science and publicity. Science (including the newly-invented social sciences) promised the ability for well-trained experts to study social problems in order to solve them, while new communications technologies like broadcast radio made it possible for the masses to be better informed about, and thus more active in, public affairs. Wilson, like many Progressives of the time, believed that “pitiless publicity,” as he put it, would end the era of political corruption and usher in a new age for democracy, which was at the time, still an unusual and radical idea of self-government. In a world full of empires (the British Empire, the Austro-Hungarian (Hapsburg) Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire etc), it wasn’t at all clear that democracy was a feasible form of political organization. Most countries existing at the dawn of the 20th century were still autocracies.

This is the context which gave rise to the public relations industry and the pioneering influence of one Vira B. Whitehouse, suffragette and early promoter of women’s rights. When war broke out in Europe in August 1914, many countries created their first ever national communications or “public relations” departments; some of them were called ministries of propaganda. When the US joined the war in 1917, the Wilson administration created the “Committee on Public Information” (CPI) headed by a pugnacious former muckraking journalist from Kansas City by the name of George Creel. A staunch believer in early 20th century Idealism, Creel was an ardent social reformer and supporter of women’s suffrage. He met Vira Whitehouse through his job as head of the Men’s League for Woman Suffrage. Creel quietly offered Whitehouse a position based in Switzerland running US propaganda efforts in Europe. (Quietly because given the perceived role of women at the time, it would’ve been controversial to publicly an-