Propaganda — who, us? The Australian Government ‘terror kit’.

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Abstract

This study tests allegations that the Australian government’s 2003 ‘terror kit’ was propaganda. Because propaganda’s definition and function are contested, content analysis was trialled as a method of clarifying propaganda detection. A propaganda index was developed using both manual and computerised coding, and while each method had limits, together they produced reliable and valid results. Measured against the index, Howard’s letter scored a 62 per cent propaganda rating.

Introduction

In February, 2003, the Australian government spent an estimated $15 million mailing ‘terror kits’ to eight million Australian households (Banham et al., 2003). The ‘National Security Public Information Campaign’ (2003) combined the kits with broadcast, print and website advertising to ‘inform the public about what is being done to look out for Australia and protect our way of life from a possible terrorist threat’ (Abetz, 2003: 3). Kits contained a fridge magnet with 24-hour ‘National Security Hotline’ numbers, a 20-page booklet describing ‘anti-terrorist’, ‘security’ and ‘emergency’ procedures and ‘encouraging’ public vigilance, and a two-page letter from Prime Minister John Howard, addressed to ‘Dear fellow Australian’.

Media debate about the kits’ appropriateness and usefulness began immediately. Government and other sources said the kits would ‘save lives’ (Kerin, 2003: 2). Critics questioned cost and practicality (‘Anti-terror Kit Target of Criticism’, 2003); spending priority over health, education or domestic violence (Jory, 2003); ‘alarmist’ content (Stubbs, 2003); and divisiveness, including vilification of Muslims (Stavrinos, 2003). Letters to the Editor columns were also split. Some writers alleged votemongering (Brown, 2003) or McCarthy-style hysteria (Thomson, 2003). Others applauded the government for ‘raising awareness’ (Keefe, 2003: 12). The kits also attracted international media attention; UK Guardian columnist Fickling commented that, with its ‘neutral corporate gloss’ and ‘Australian dream’ photographs, ‘more than anything, the terror kit resembles a party election manifesto’ (2003: 6). Voice of America columnist Maria (2003) reported various views, including an Australian academic’s opinion that the kits carefully avoided alienating any particular community sector.

Australian public feeling manifested in an estimated 150 000 kits returned unopened (‘Countdown to War’, 2003). Postal workers, concerned returning kits could be contaminated, considered striking. Special handling measures were introduced (‘Terror Kit Strike Averted’, 2003). Former Brisbane Labor Lord Mayor Jim Soorley, who spearheaded the ‘return to sender’ campaign, described the kits as ‘propaganda by the federal government as it seeks to justify a likely war in the Middle East’ (Morris, 2003: 2). The Australian Greens attempted unsuccessfully to meet government representatives to return kits in person (Valenti, 2003) and labelled the kits political (‘Terror Kit ‘Political Mission’, 2003).
Despite vehement anti-kit protest, the issue remained unresolved. Media debate was dichotomised by the newsworthiness of conflict into a simple binary. The government described the kits as public information, or ‘practical and useful information’ (Todd, 2003: 10), implying non-political communication conveying important data. Soorley’s and the Greens’ responses typified their opposition status, and the government easily dismissed their ‘propaganda’ tag as political namecalling. No formal mechanism (for example, an inquiry) was enacted to determine the validity of either side’s claims.

Many communication theorists would argue that allegations of propaganda or political manifesto against public communication demand examination beyond the ‘circumstantial and intuitive’ theatre of media analysis (Kabanoff et al., 2001: 87). Combs and Nimmo (1993: 1) are concerned by propaganda’s ‘ritualistic acceptance’ in contemporary society. They encourage communication researchers to identify and describe its occurrences, as a ‘major form of social power with which we should be familiar’ (1993: 1). Likewise, Cunningham (2002: 1) calls propaganda research ‘an important step in understanding the status of information in today’s mass mediated society’. Yet Cunningham argues that such research is declining. Communication studies have ‘lost sight of the meaning of propaganda, of the idea of propaganda’ (2002: ix) — although forthcoming work (for example, O'Shaughnessy, 2005) suggests this may be changing.

Australian propaganda research is particularly scarce. In 1989, White demanded increased Australian political communication analysis (cited in Kabanoff et al., 2001). Yet in 2001, Kabanoff et al. claimed Australian communication scholars still had shown ‘little formal interest’ in political rhetoric (2001: 87). Ward (2003: 2) describes Australian communication studies as ‘barren soil’ for political communication research. Perhaps linked to this lack of scrutiny, he categorises Australia as a ‘PR state’, where manipulative political rhetoric is rampant and distinctions between ‘public information and party propaganda’ are blurred (2003: 3). He specifically suggests scrutinising the terror kit as a potential propaganda example.

Those demanding more Australian political rhetoric research also recommend increased study within the ‘disciplined tradition of textual analysis’ (Kabanoff et al., 2001: 87). Ward’s own research focuses on ‘the institutional framework which allows governments to coordinate and implement campaigns intended to steer, or manage, policy debates’ (2003: 3), but he also notes a ‘legitimate place for the study of how parties and governments practise public relations’, including their ‘covert and overt public relations “manoeuvres”’ (2003: 3).

This study responds to these calls for increased Australian political communication research in general, and textual analysis in particular, by seeking to develop a reliable tool to detect, describe and compare propagandistic rhetorical manoeuvres. Howard’s two-page letter was chosen for testing because, unlike the booklet, it contained no emergency phone numbers, no disaster instructions and no first aid guidelines. Whatever the intent or reception of the booklets themselves, little media attention was paid to the letter. What, then, did it contain? Specifically, did it contain any propaganda, as Soorley had suggested?

What is propaganda?

Propaganda definitions vary markedly. Some are broadly inclusive — for example, Pratkanis and Aronson (1991) define propaganda as ‘any mass “suggestion” or influence’ (1991: 9).
They exclude ‘Protagoras’ ideal’ communication (1991: 149), which only ‘illuminates’ issues (1991: 9), but include anything aiming to change receivers’ opinions. Their definition echoes Lasswell, who included all communication influencing human action (1937, cited in Severin and Tankard, 2001), and Lee and Lee, who included all communication designed to attain ‘predetermined ends’, whether harmful or beneficial (1939: 15). Howard’s letter, in encouraging Australians to ‘be alert … and report suspicious activity’ (2003: 1), seeks attitudinal and behavioural change. It instructs ‘you and your family and friends’ to ‘read the booklet’ and ‘heed the experts’ advice’ (2003: 1). By broad definitions of propaganda as persuasive communication, the letter is propaganda.

Other definitions are narrower. Severin and Tankard (2001) adopt Brown’s 1958 differentiation between propaganda and persuasion, based on whose needs are served:

As far as the techniques used are concerned, persuasion and propaganda are identical. Only when it is perceived that an act benefits the source, but not the receiver, can such an act or message be called *propaganda*. (2001: 109)

Applying this definition to the letter produces the opposite finding. Louw argues that it would be foolish to think Australia could never be a ‘terror’ target (2003: 3). If the kit increases vigilance, public safety is served. However, he argues that the kit primarily benefits the security and military infrastructure (‘securocrats’) that produced it, the government and Howard personally. It also benefits other politicians, the media and ‘terrorists’, by generating moral panic that enables each group to empire-build. Louw’s perception of a securocrat-media symbiotic spiral is supported by the kit’s repeated instruction to readers to consume news media (Abetz, 2003: 14, 15 and 16). However, while the public are low on Louw’s kit beneficiaries list, they are included. Because Severin and Tankard’s wording is ‘not the receiver’, rather than ‘more than the receiver’, by this definition the kits are not propaganda. (If the 150 000 Australians who returned kits unopened felt it offered no benefit, however, it may for them have represented propaganda.)

The above definitions again contrast with everyday perceptions of propaganda as unethical persuasion. Pratkanis and Aronson acknowledge that, while they see shades of grey, in popular understanding propaganda is synonymous with lies or deception (1991). By popular definition, the terror kit is probably not propaganda in the sense of being untruthful. Vague rather than explicit, it contains little information assessable for accuracy. For example, in a Q&A section, the answer to the question ‘Is Australia a potential terrorist target?’ is ‘Every country, including Australia, is a potential terrorist target.’ (Abetz, 2003: 14) Although evasive, this response is not ‘false’, and would not qualify as propaganda, popularly defined. Thus propaganda assessment using functional definitions is problematic; different definitions give conflicting findings. A more consistent approach analyses propaganda’s means. Black (2001) reviewed 15 definitions, including those above, identifying ‘closed mindedness’ as a repeated concept. He listed three devices exemplifying closure: ‘simplified, pat answers (usually relayed by “authoritative sources”’); ‘a world in which the good guys and the bad guys are readily identifiable’; and ‘simplistic and direct connection between causes and effects’ (2001: 129).

Criteria such as Black’s help reduce the disparities and ‘grey areas’ encountered by communicators when propaganda assessment depends on definitional semantics. Other researchers using criteria include Lee and Lee, whose 1939 study listed seven propaganda
devices — name-calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking and bandwagon.

Although first described more than 60 years ago, the Lees’ devices are still listed in communication textbooks, suggesting their use remains current. Lee and Lee employed them to attack pro-Nazi propaganda, but some current uses are more ambivalent. For example, Newsom et al (2000) argue in a public relations textbook that, ‘although it encompasses some techniques that are used to mislead, the word propaganda should not be thought of as totally negative’ (2000: 195). They see ‘nothing inherent in the nature of propaganda that prevents it from being used to change attitudes and behaviour in a constructive way’ (2000: 195), including specifically by adopting the Lees’ criteria. Their teleological approach lends support to Combs and Ninmo’s (2001) claim that propaganda tolerance is increasing, albeit for ends judged moral by communicators. Such exclusive focus on ends may be hard to justify in practice, however, given morality’s complexity and subjectivity. Baker and Martinson argue that communication practitioners employing ‘persuasive mass communication … frequently have a difficult time defending what it is they do from a societal, common good, and ethical perspective, in their own minds as well as in their conversations with others’ (2001: 148). A relatively simple to understand and administer propaganda index helps clarify some of that difficulty by enabling communicators to assess means as well as ends. Severin and Tankard (2001) argue that propaganda devices ‘still serve their initial purpose in providing a checklist of techniques commonly used in mass communication’ (2001: 126). Widespread use of such a checklist would also preclude political communicators from claiming ignorance of their own deployment of propagandistic devices.

Therefore, to develop an index that could answer calls for increased focus on and familiarity with propaganda, and provide clarity for communication practitioners, this research considered a criteria or ‘means’-based approach worth exploring. Initial testing trialled the Lees’ seven devices as content analysis categories. However, the Lees’ original wording proved unreliable, and over time the categories were significantly modified to obtain reliability. The result is a new index that grew out of, but is not identical to, that of the Lees. It contains clearer propaganda device categories, and new criteria to reflect new findings. (See Appendix 1 for categories and brief descriptors; please contact the researcher for detailed coding instructions.) The method section, below, overviews the index’s development. Early testing used the Lees’ original criteria with only slight modification, and their word-by-word analysis method. Final testing used significantly redesigned categories and more reliable unitisation.

Method

Cole’s twentieth-century propaganda research bibliography (1996) lists 53 ‘propaganda effects’ studies. None nominates content analysis as a key method, and no ‘propaganda technique’ studies are listed. Yet Weber (1990) specifically nominates content analysis as a ‘notable’ method to ‘detect the existence of propaganda’ (1990: 9) in his content analysis overview, perhaps because of Lasswell’s foundational propaganda studies in the 1920s and 1930s (which are often termed content analysis — for example, by Macnamara, 2003). Kabanoff et al. (2001) also nominate content analysis as ‘an important contemporary approach to the empirical study of language use’, which by ‘quantification of particular linguistic formations in the text distinguishes it[s]elf from more intuitive approaches to
rhetorical criticism’ (2001: 88). This study considered content analysis worth exploring as a way to assess propaganda less subjectively than definitions based in user response or author intent.

To ensure reliability, both human and computer coding methods were used. Kabanoff et al. (2001) indicate ‘word-analysis computer software provides an extremely efficient method of quantifying themes’ (2001: 88). However, they acknowledge ‘the usefulness of — and indeed the need for — interpretation’ (2001: 88) and suggest computer results (manifest coding) are most useful when combined with human interpretation (latent coding), as a way to ‘demonstrate interpretive conclusions based on statistical evidence’ rather than replace human insight (2001: 89). This study used human coding as the primary method, based on Babbie’s argument that latent coding gives more depth of understanding than manifest coding and ‘what is sacrificed in reliability is gained in validity’ (1998: 313). However, in line with previous content analyses using multiple test methods (e.g. Gray and Densten, 1998; Insch et al., 1997), results were triangulated with computerised tests.

Unitisation
Early testing coded (as did the Kabanoff et al. and Lee and Lee studies) individual words — for example, ‘we can all play our part’ was coded ‘bandwagon’ three times rather than once for the whole phrase, because it had three specific bandwagon components (‘we’, ‘all’ and ‘our’) and three combine more powerfully than only one or two used in a similar phrase. Immediately, however, problems arose with compound terms such as ‘highly trained’ and ‘highly experienced’, where the word ‘highly’ added to propaganda impact, yet was not a device on its own. Coding rules were written to overcome this, and a pilot study completed using words, but reliability was affected. Researchers frequently identified identical devices within sentences, but attached them to different words.

Later unitisation used what Holsti (cited in Weber, 1990) calls ‘themes’ and Gottschalk (cited in Neuendorf, 2002) calls ‘verbal clauses’ — single semantic units containing an action, its perceiver, its actor or its target. Text was split into obvious clauses for pre-testing, then coders nominated any further splits (in line with Gottschalk et al.’s emic approach (cited in Neuendorf, 2002), allowing coders to define units for analysis) before final testing. In this way, clause parsing was agreed and, in the case of the prime minister’s letter, 267 clauses finalised before formal coding commenced (c.f. Neuendorf, 2002 for other studies using this method). Gottschalk’s extensive content analyses across more than three decades tested clauses, words, sentences and paragraphs as data units, and found clauses ‘to be the smallest identifiable unit for which they could reliably code for their desired variables’ (cited in Neuendorf, 2002: 72). In this study, shifting from words to clauses increased reliability from 0.719 to 0.961.

Categories
The Lees’ categories were modified repeatedly and tested on various texts (including ‘classic’ Nazi propaganda samples) for 12 months before reliable, stable, discrete categories were achieved. Structural changes included subsuming testimonial under transfer because of category overlap, and splitting transfer into positive and negative types (the Lees only counted positive transfer). At one stage, the category of fear appeal was added, based on the persuasion research of Hovland and the Yale group, who defined it as a key propaganda technique (cited in Jowett and O’Donnell, 1986; c.f. Pratkanis and Aronson, 1991). However, this was later removed because it overlapped name-calling and negative transfer. In
hindsight, such overlap is foreseeable: fear is a possible communicator intent or reader
effect, not a message characteristic. Its failure as a reliable category lends support to
Neuendorf’s argument (below) that content analysis can only reliably code message
characteristics, and should not be used to infer purposes or outcomes. Card stacking was
removed altogether because occurrences were so low in pre-testing that reliability became
impossible. Further, coders could not prove or disprove content accuracy (nor was it the
study’s aim). Last, the category of ‘manifest destiny’ was added to the instrument based on
consistent identification of this as a recurring ‘other’ variable by a range of coders examining
political texts, particularly those from the United States (although it was not a particularly
strong device in the terror kit).

Category revision occurred in consultation with a group of coders. However, in both
pilot and final phases, calculation of final reliability scores used an independent coder who
had had no contact with the test group and no previous experience of the test document.

Limitations

This study specifically aimed to test presence and frequency of a pre-determined set of
rhetorical devices. There are two schools of thought in content analysis. Krippendorff
(1980), Weber (1990) and others argue that inferences about factors beyond the text must
be drawn from content data; by contrast, Neuendorf suggests such inferences are not
supportable (2002). This study takes the latter view: that content analysis provides data
about message content and not supposition about broader factors such as communicator
intent or audience reception, but argues, like Neuendorf, that enhancing understanding of
content alone is still an important research outcome. Neuendorf admits such studies are
sometimes ‘targets for those who question the scientific importance or sophistication of
content analysis as a method’ (2002: 53). Certainly, descriptive content analysis using
predetermined categories has limits. It finds only what researchers are looking for (although
in this case a strong variable was permitted to emerge), and reliability depends on clarity
of coding instructions and training. This does not, however, invalidate content analysis as a
research tool. As Henningham argued in defence of his 1996 content analysis of Australian
newspapers, while content analysis may not acknowledge ‘individual readers’ selective’ use
of texts, and cannot provide a reading equating ‘to that of any single reader’, it ‘does
succeed in telling us “what is there” — the total corpus of a [text] available for use and
abstraction by a variety of readers’ (1996: 23). That ‘corpus’ can then be used for
comparison to establish differences and similarities between the main characteristics of
‘what is there’ in different texts (perhaps to establish, as Kabanoff et al. (2001) have urged,
a database of Australian and New Zealand political texts) and, in this case, to determine
‘what is there’ in one particular text.

Criteria-based analyses such as that of the Lees have also been criticised for ignoring
propaganda’s ‘broader, nondiscursive features of manipulation’ (Cunningham, 2001: 141).
However, this criticism refers to one particular type of propaganda — what Ellul (cited in
Black, 2001: 125) calls ‘sociological’ or ‘integration’ propaganda (implicit or ‘invisible’
socialisation into pervasive ideologies via their diffusion throughout cultural artefacts) — as
distinct from explicit or ‘political’ propaganda that exhorts publics to certain actions or
beliefs via a direct appeal. Cunningham considers that criteria-based analysis ‘works
satisfactorily’ with political propaganda’s ‘well-defined utterances such as speeches,
advertisements, and announcements’ (2001: 141). In this study, criteria-based analysis was considered to generate ‘reasonably objective insights’ (Cunningham, 2001: 132) about a well-defined utterance, and was therefore a useful starting point in navigating the web of complex ethical and structural considerations characterising the propaganda debate. Black argues that criteria-based approaches enable researchers to consider propaganda ‘in less value-laden terms’ and therefore ‘proceed intelligently through the swamp’ (2001: 135).

Finally, the current method provides only a count, with no allowance for each unit’s intensity. Future work may address this using factor analysis or other appropriate statistical tools.

**Results**

Of Howard’s 267 phrases, the mean total count for the particular propaganda devices coded was 166, or 62 per cent. The remaining 38 per cent was ‘other’, which included both other persuasive devices and perceived ‘neutral’ phrases (‘neutral’ and ‘other persuasive’ subcategories could not be reliably separated, neutrality being too subjective a quality). Glittering generality (GG) occurred most frequently (22 per cent). Bandwagon (BW) was next most common (17 per cent), then name-calling (NC; 9 per cent), transfer positive (TP; 7 per cent), plain folks (PF; 4 per cent), transfer negative (TN; 3 per cent), and one count of manifest destiny (<1 per cent).

**Glittering generality (GG)**

Fifty-nine phrases giving abstract or emotive positive support to the terror kit’s cause without evidence or specific information were coded GG. These included phrases such as ‘in large numbers’, ‘time and time again’, ‘well prepared’ and ‘significantly increasing’. The most common GG was ‘security’. It was used as a positive label to communicate a state of ‘safety’ and discuss ‘safety’ measures. Security’s ‘glitter’ was strengthened by juxtaposition with other positive abstractions such as ‘prosperity’ and ‘freedom’, suggesting future analysis of proxemic relationships between words and resultant unit intensity may be fruitful.

‘Intelligence’ (to describe Australia’s internal and external surveillance activities) was another common GG, as was ‘defence’ (a label applied to military forces regardless of whether their activities are off-shore or defensive — for example, Australia’s presence in Iraq). Others included ‘individual rights’, ‘rights’, ‘democracy’ and ‘respect’. GGS were also frequently used to describe government or military officials, activities and equipment — for example, ‘experts’, ‘specialists’, ‘highly trained’, ‘highly experienced’, ‘professional(s)’ and ‘state-of-the-art’. The abstraction ‘common sense’ was used to describe the act of following the kit’s advice, along with ‘good judgement’. Phrases discussing ‘protection’ (and variants such as ‘protect’) were also coded GG. Other positive but unverifiable labels were ‘strong’ (e.g. ‘strong … democracy’, ‘strong … society’, ‘strong … capability’) and ‘vigorous’ (also applied to ‘democracy’). The words ‘encourage’ and ‘encouraging’ were coded GG where they described the kit’s request that readers ‘take necessary steps’. In short, GG included any positive but ‘unverified and perhaps unverifiable abstract nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and physical representations’ used to advance the kit’s cause in place of ‘empirical validation to establish its truths, conclusions, or impressions’ (Black, 2001: 133).

As an example of how these phrases were used, Howard’s final paragraph combines 14 glittering generalities with bandwagon, plain folks and a tradition (manifest destiny)
appeal to generate a powerful, inaccurate, positive stereotype of an homogeneous Australian society:

As a people we have traditionally engaged the world optimistically. We are great travellers, whether for work, education or pleasure. Young Australians in particular go overseas in large numbers and we receive many visitors from other countries to our shores. Our open, friendly nature makes us welcome guests and warm hosts. All of us want that to continue. Australians have every reason to be hopeful and optimistic about the future. We are a strong, free, compassionate society — together, we will look out for Australia and protect the way of life we value so highly. (Howard, 2003: 2)

**Bandwagon (BW)**
The BW mean count was 45.5. It included phrases using the word ‘our’ to imply a sense of collective ownership and involvement by readers in military or government institutions or activities (‘our Special Forces’ and ‘our economy’ operate very differently at an emotional level from ‘the Special Forces’ or ‘the economy’, for example). The phrase ‘small number of’ preceding ‘fanatics’ was counted BW because it marginalised the ‘other’ viewpoint (bandwagon by reverse implication). Coders detected BW in the group duty, collective benefit and like-mindedness connotations of totalising phrases such as ‘our community’, ‘our way of life’, ‘our country’, ‘our nation’, ‘all play our part’, ‘our shores’, ‘our obligations’ and ‘our open, friendly nature’, and in the implied mass agreement of phrases using ‘we’ or ‘us’. For example, Howard’s second paragraph relies heavily upon ‘we have to’, ‘all’, ‘everyone can play’ and similar BW collectives:

> We have to take necessary steps to protect ourselves, but in doing so, we also need to strike the right balance between sensible precaution and unnecessary alarm. We can do this best if we are all as well informed as possible about the initiatives being taken to protect our country and how everyone can play their part. (Howard, 2003: 1)

A paragraph commencing, for example, ‘citizens have to take necessary steps to protect themselves’ functions differently. Kabanoff et al. argue that terms like ‘we’ are recurrently employed by politicians to ‘convey the sense of solidarity, of being part of something bigger than oneself’ (2001: 92).

**Name-calling (NC)**
Twenty-five negative names were identified; the most common was ‘terror’ (and variants such as ‘terrorist’, ‘terrorism’, etc.). Others included ‘sad fact’, ‘extremists’, ‘fanatics’, ‘atrocity’, ‘dangerous world’ and ‘something terrible’. Lasswell’s research aligned such terms with key propaganda objectives to mobilise hatred against or demoralise an enemy (cited in Severin and Tankard, 2001); it is important, however, to note that content analysis cannot prove objectives, only provide data to complement more speculative interpretations.

**Transfer positive (TP)**
The kit’s TP appeal was most apparent in illustrations such as the Australian flag, a television personality and a backyard cricket game. These transferred celebrity-endorsed patriotism
and a nationalistic stereotype of carefree outdoors lifestyle to the act of obeying the kit in the same way as ‘advertising often transfers lifestyle to products’ (Severin and Tankard, 2001: 118). There is much data for semiotic analysis of these and other photos. This analysis, however, focused on the letter’s text, which contained 18 TP devices, including several transfers of credibility and ‘expertise’ from high-level public officials. The most obvious transfer, however, was from Howard himself. His authorship of the letter transferred high ‘importance’ to the kit’s contents, as spelled out in the mailing cover page heading ‘an important message from the Prime Minister’ (in large print). (The word ‘important’ occurred nine times in the kit.) Each self-reference by Howard (‘I am writing’, ‘I believe’, ‘I encourage’, etc.) transferred his qualities of importance and solemnity (as Australia’s highest-ranking elected official) to the message. Possibly the excessive levels of personal Howard transfer also contributed to some of the backlash against the kit, however; for readers opposed to his politics, it was impossible to separate the kit from Howard.

Plain folks (PF)
The kit’s illustrations were also powerful PF appeals. Pictures of the ubiquitous ‘Aussie barbecue’, beach scenes, family backyard cricket game, and a multicultural schoolyard strongly connoted normalised ‘average’ middle-class family values. In the text, the mean PF count of 10.5 included terms such as ‘daily lives’ (the ‘normal’ activity ‘we’ do while ‘they’ do ‘suspicious activity’), and references to neighbourhoods, workplaces, families, and community. The plain folks concept can be an influential tool in demonising the ‘enemy’ as ‘outside’ what is ‘normal’, as external to the idealised and over-simplified ‘community’ (in which ‘we’ are all assumed to belong to families, live in neighbourhoods, go to work every day and hold the same ideas about what is ‘ordinary’ in order to ‘spot … things that are out of the ordinary’ (Abetz, 2003: 6)).

Transfer negative (TN)
Seven references to September 11 and the Bali bombings were coded TN, because they transferred the implied threat from these activities to Australian soil.

Reliability

Given the relatively small text size, variant propaganda rates within texts, and the study’s aim to develop a reliable index, intercoder reliability was calculated using the entire text rather than random samples. Data were input into SPSS, and Cohen’s kappa calculated at 0.961, indicating excellent reliability. Categories were also reliable: GG was least reliable, but still had strong agreement with 56 cases agreed and six discrepancies (89.3 per cent agreement); ‘other’ was next least reliable (98 cases agreed and six disagreed, or 93.9 per cent); followed by BW (44 agreed and three disagreed, or 93.2 per cent). There was perfect agreement in the other categories. The most common category confusion was between GG and ‘other’, indicating tighter category descriptors would improve future results.

Other results

The manual results were triangulated with a computerised word frequency test. Results from human and computer counts cannot be directly compared, as sampling units were different and software cannot eliminate homographs. However, frequency counts usefully identify areas of interest and key count discrepancies. The computer identified ‘we’ as the
letter’s most frequent key word, with a count of 19, followed by ‘our’, with 13 occurrences, thus endorsing the strong BW factor in manual findings, but providing additional evidence that it was achieved with a small number of repeated terms. Other frequent BW terms were ‘all’ (six), ‘us’ (three) and ‘together’ (two). In contrast, the most common GG (‘security’) had a count of only six, indicating high GG was achieved with a diversity of synonymous terms, many of them used only once. Other frequent terms were ‘Australia’ and its variants such as Australians, national and country (23 counts). The exclusion of some of these nationalistic collectivities from the manual BW count indicates the value of human coding, whereby non-propagandistic occurrences of terms elsewhere employed rhetorically can be excluded — for example, human coders differentiated between the way ‘Australian’ was used in ‘Australian Federal Police’ and the phrase ‘I ask all Australians to help’. Interestingly, another high frequency word was ‘you’ (10), indicating a focus on individual responsibility not detected with the propaganda index. In future work, an ‘opposing’ category to manifest destiny might be added.

Analysis

Howard’s letter contained the propaganda techniques tested for on average 62 times per 100 phrases. It used primarily ‘positive’ propaganda, such as glittering generality and bandwagon appeals, suggesting it may have provided an affirmative rallying call designed to increase receptiveness to the information that followed in the kit (although content analysis alone cannot prove intent). What the test also cannot confirm is what level of propaganda frequency qualifies texts as fitting the label ‘propaganda’ overall. Propaganda is perhaps better represented as a continuum rather than absent versus present. Most texts probably contain some propaganda, and a comparison is needed to determine whether the letter’s levels are higher than, say, a religious conversion pamphlet, a clothing advertisement or this article. As Kabanoff et al. (2001) have suggested, an Australian political texts database with accompanying content analyses across various content categories would be useful, and more work in this area might fill the void.

The data also cannot determine what, if any, propaganda levels are appropriate in public information. Any level of government-sponsored propaganda technique would be unacceptable in some cultures — for example, The Netherlands, where the Government Information Act requires that ‘public information campaigns carried out by the Dutch government must not convey a particular political point of view and should not be persuasive’ (Beljon, 2001: 268). Beljon argues that such a prohibition is impractical, but it is nonetheless a legislated aim. Australia has no such prohibition.

Conclusion

In criteria terms, Soorley was right: the terror kit mail-out contained propaganda. The enclosed letter contained more propagandistic than ‘other’ content, suggesting Ward’s concern about blurred boundaries between public information and political rhetoric in Australia is warranted.

In seeking to assess the validity of Soorley’s particular allegation, this study also sought to develop a tool to answer calls for more research into, and specifically more textual analysis of, Australian political communication. The combined manual and computer content analysis methodology enabled development of a propaganda index that, while it
should not replace a broader cultural theory approach, complements analysis of effects, reception and power with a simple, reliable means to describe, quantify and compare texts. For students and practitioners in particular, the index helps to clarify ‘grey areas’ and encourage self-assessment of communication output.

References


Brown, D. 2003, ‘I’m not sure that John Howard will be pleased, but I’m alert and alarmed’, Newcastle Herald, 15 February, p. 30. Factiva database Document nehr000020030216dz2f0001i


Countdown to War: Return-to-Sender Row Over War Kits. 2003, Sunday Mail, 9 March, p. 9.


Appendix 1: Propaganda categories and descriptors

Name-calling (NC): Negative labels (terrorists, extremists, fanatics, ferals, ‘rent-a-crowd’) encouraging summary negative stance without examining history, complexity, or evidence.
Glittering generality (GG): Abstract positive labelling using ‘virtue’ connotators (‘intelligence’ for covert surveillance) or euphemisms (‘collateral damage’, ‘friendly fire’ or ‘biosolids’). Also any of the following where substantiating evidence is not provided: broadly affirmative adjectives (‘state-of-the-art’, ‘high-tech’, ‘highly trained’); positive abstractions (‘prosperity’, ‘freedom’, ‘rights’, democracy, ‘respect’, ‘common sense’); vagaries (‘in large numbers’, ‘time and time again’, ‘well prepared’ and ‘significantly increasing’); and subjective adjectives or adverbs (‘strong’, ‘beautiful’, ‘vigorous’).

Transfer positive (TP): Tangential item transferring positive qualities to issue at hand (symbols such as flags or anthem, sponsorship, celebrity or ‘expert’ endorsement).

Transfer negative (TN): Direct or implied association with tangential negative incidents, places, people or symbols (‘links with Al Qaida’).

Plain folks (PF): Implication that ideas are ‘of the people’ (‘family values’, ‘hard working, decent folk’, ‘everyday mums and dads’, ‘average Australians’, ‘ordinary people’, ‘normal people’ or ‘middle Australia’). Focuses on values, implying normalcy, ‘decency’, or rationality for an opinion and demonising other views as aberrant or unreasonable, even if they are majority.

Bandwagon (BW): Peer pressure or spiral of silence device. Implies ‘everyone else’ thinks a particular way through references to ‘imagined communities’ such as states or nations, and phrases such as ‘we’, ‘our’, ‘all’, ‘everybody’. Invites solidarity with an implied large and inclusive group. Suggests mass support for an opinion, or marginalises alternative views as minority. Focuses on numbers (collectivities) rather than values.

Manifest destiny (MD): Invocation of God (any kind or faith), destiny, fate, natural processes or universal design to support argument. Removal of accountability for an idea or issue from individuals and attribution of responsibility to deterministic ‘greater forces’ (God’s will, karma, tradition, luck, History, Nature).

Other (O): Neutral, with no rhetorical or persuasive effect, or persuasive but does not fit into any above categories.