

## 21st CENTURY PROPAGANDA AND EDUCATION – FRIENDS OR FOES?

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**Abstract:** *Today, in the 21st century, there are extensive discussions about propaganda. On the one hand, education can be used for propaganda but, on the other hand, education can cultivate skills, such as critical thinking, necessary to identify and reject propaganda. I set out to identify frames promoted by Sputnik, in the context of the Centenary, to identify mental models activated by the propaganda and those associated frames, and to determine if they are related to the educational process within school. The strongest frame is failure; however, we also identified attitudes of rejection of the approach of communicator but we cannot associate these attitudes with school. We consider that school (at least secondary school and high school) does not cultivate enough elements of Romanian identity.*

**Key words:** *propaganda; education; propagandistic discourse, mental model, framing.*

### 1. Introduction

Anthony R. Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson (2010) analyze propaganda and education comparatively, focusing their attention on the differences between the two. The authors appeal in this regard to the definitions in The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, where propaganda is defined as „the systematic propagation of a given doctrine”, and education as “an act of transmitting knowledge or skills” (apud Pratkanis, Aronson, 2010, p. 107) The difference that the authors highlight in those definitions refers to the agreement or disagreement with certain values but does not agree with it as being most relevant, thus Pratkanis and Aronson refer to the ideas of a German psychologist, Max Wertheimer, who, in the middle of the last century, made a pertinent distinction between the two concepts / processes / mechanisms. “According to Wertheimer, propaganda tries to prevent people from thinking and acting as human beings with rights; it manipulates prejudices and emotions in order to impose the will of others. Education, on the contrary, should provide people's abilities to stand on their own feet and make their own decisions; it should encourage critical thinking” (apud Pratkanis, Aronson, 2010, p. 108).

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I have also identified in the literature in the field other differences between education and propaganda: Education - process through which information, knowledge and truths are tracked and discovered, through critical analysis. The purpose of education is the beneficiary to form an independent and reasonable judgment. Propaganda - the process of disseminating information - including bias and deception - to persuade the target audience to accept a special agenda, often of political nature. Synthesizing the ideas in the articles mentioned in the bibliography, we made a table that illustrates the main differences between education and propaganda:

Table 1

*Comparative presentation of the concepts of education and propaganda*

<b>Education</b>	<b>Propaganda</b>
That's what school does	It is any effort to deceive the mind
Only the truth is propagated	The truth is propagated but alongside the lie, deception, appearance, misinformation, falsity
It is rational	It is irrational
Content is desirable	Content is undesirable
It supports the moral values of the society	It always attacks them
It is „open minded”	It is „narrow minded”
Aims for the accumulation of ideas, values	Ignores or limits them
Focuses on <b>how</b> to think	Focuses on <b>what</b> to think
Objective	Subjective
Looks at all the facets of a problem	Looks at only one side
Encourages dialogue	Encourages monologue
It aims to develop skills (both mental and physical), social attitudes, mature behavior	Only wants a certain type of behavior influencing decisions in this regard
Provides information for decisions	Influences decisions
It mainly uses mental process	Firstly, uses the suggestion and stimulates the emotion

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Propagandistic discourse and manipulative discourse

In a constructivist approach, the discourse is actually a construction of reality because it cannot include a complete picture, from all angles and with all the related details. And then it uses only a perspective of exposing the information, which it transforms into an event, to which it also attaches a certain interpretation. And so, in the mind of the public, a reality constructed through the media is outlined. According to Van Dijk (1997), propagandistic discourse offers truncated representations, reduces reality to certain aspects, excludes alternatives. **The manipulative discourse** activates certain social cognitions, a certain socially shared knowledge and thus highlights certain dominant meanings in society. Van Dijk's conclusion is that propaganda discourse is manipulative.

## 2.2. Mental model. Tuen van Dijk's theory

The mental model includes representations of situations, events, in the episodic memory of the individual. Being representations of memory, mental models can be viewed as hierarchically structured networks, organized by a series of categories. The mental model includes knowledge, beliefs, stereotypes, collective opinions, emotions, ideologies, which are activated by speech.

The theory of the mental model in speech production was developed by van Dijk; it explains how cognitive representations in memory influence and are influenced by discourse. According to van Dijk's theory (apud Addison, 2013), there are three main types of representations: a) situation models, b) context models and c) experience (event) models.

a) **Situation models** - are representations of the discursive event. They refer to the topic of the speech and information relevant to memory that can be easily accessed. For example, the readers, after reading the headline of a news story, will begin to interpret and organize the text according to the existing representations, activating the information considered relevant to the situation they are in now. This older information, stored in episodic memory and that ensures knowledge, is important because it influences how new information is processed.

b) **Context models** - are representations of local and global contexts, formed by particularities of the situation and ways of interpreting the respective situation, interpretations based on socio-culturally established knowledge. In order to understand the discursive situation they are in and to be able to produce a discourse in turn, individuals must have global and local knowledge of the context (for example, cultural and historical knowledge, the relationship with the speaker and previous actions) that influence their discursive choices about what is socially appropriate.

c) **Experience models** - are representations of events or experiences in long-term memory.

## 2.3. Frames. Framing

**Frame** is a type of social cognition that activates mental cognitions (memory, emotions, representations etc.). Gitlin had an important contribution to frame theory. In Gitlin's conception, frames are "patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, accentuation and exclusion" (apud Beciu, 2011, p. 137). Beciu explains the definition and appreciates that frame is a "way of structuring the main elements that come into the form of a media, institutional, protest speech, etc." It involves "a scheme for assembling information, typology of characters, chronology of facts, etc." (Beciu, 2011, p. 138). The respective scheme is not indicated directly and explicitly but it needs to be reconstructed by the beneficiary of the communication.

Another important author in the field of frame theories is Robert E. Entman; he considers that „frame involves the selection of facets of events or themes and then the introduction of connections between them that will lead to a certain interpretation, evaluation and / or solution. Frame is a mechanism for influencing the interlocutor and

the public opinion” (apud Beciu, 2011, p. 138). According to Reese (apud Matthes, 2012, p. 15), “frames are principles of socially shared organization that structure significantly the social world”. Frames are part of the cultural system of the society / community, manifest in the media content and influence the public's cognitions and attitudes. According to Entman, there are three conditions that must be met to build a frame: a). Cultural resonance (to be part of the public and daily life of the society, they use elements that are accessible and have an emotional charge); b). Periodicity (they are used constantly, frequently and thus have been imprinted on people's minds); c). Activates a certain type of memory (usually collective memory) (apud Beciu, 2011, p. 138). Frames can be found in: strategic communications of political and organizational actors (for example, political parties, non-governmental organizations, etc.); cognitive structures of journalists; content of the press; minds of citizens.

### 3. Methodology

Specifically, I chose two articles from Sputnik. I applied **framing** (according to the methodology promoted by the French School). The articles were used in a focus group, organized with a group of students; they were asked to read the articles after which I applied a set of questions, within a focus group, based on an open-ended question guide, from general to specific. Based on the students' responses, we proceeded to identify and analyze the activated mental models, and interpreted the results from the perspective of the correlation with the education and the Romanian education process.

### 4. Identify frames. Results

First of all, I explain why I chose Sputnik as the basis for my research. In this regard, I appeal to the communication contract assumed and promoted by Sputnik.

According to the site itself, “**Sputnik** news agency started operating on the global market on November 10, 2014. **Sputnik** presents a multipolar world, in which each country has its national interests, culture, history, traditions. Sputnik says what others are silent about. (...) We provide alternative information, including radio transmissions. Sputnik creates its own multimedia content and transmits in Russian, Abkhazian, (...)”. In fact, **Sputnik network** is indicated by the specialists in the research of Russian informational operations, along with **RT television (Russia Today)**, as one of the pillars of Russian propaganda at international level. Both belong to the Russian state. Sputnik does not actually carry out its own investigations, reports or news, but, in general, takes and packs “alternative” information and positioning from the Romanian press.

The two articles chosen are: “*How did the centenary of Romania go from 1918 ... back to 1818!*” (published 25.10.2018) and “*2018 - a year of the Romanian Apocalypse, not of the Centenary!*” (published 31.12.2018).

#### 4.1. Framing

##### a) Communication situation

- Immediate context: the Centenary

- Symbolic context the Centenary, the national day and the winter holidays.
- The type of communication: journalistic/editorial, critical to the Romanian authorities.
- Communication contract: as mentioned and argued above, the journalist does not respect the contract
- Thematic: the articles are presented as an overview of the negative aspects of our society, in the most important areas of life: political, social, economic and security
- Participants and their social and communicational roles: the journalist, with the role of informative character, who wishes to bring the truth to light; the „foreign master” - clearly indicated: NATO, USA and EU; Romanians - presented as servants, embarrassed, so with a lower status, unworthy, humiliating.

### b) Positioning and representation

**Positioning:** The communicator generally assumes his own position directly but alternates with the collective assuming (*us*, the Romanians) and transfers his position in the collective area as if it were shared collectively. Relations between *us*, between *us* and *others*, are predominantly conflicting. Opposition of *THEY* (foreign masters – the USA, NATO, the EU) and the *US* (Romanian people, persecuted) appears, opposition that has a conflicting nature. The Romanian journalist identifies himself with the *US*. In addition, the source of the article is diffused, the journalist does not take or comment on a news item but pronounces on the subject, in apparent personal name but let us understand that it is the opinion of the majority.

**Representation:** Sputnik builds around the theme of the Centenary a universe in which the actors are Romanian citizens, the external enemy (the USA, NATO, the EU), the Romanian authorities subordinated to these foreign interests. It attacks Romania in the fundamental aspects of society: economy, language, culture, education, history, faith, traditions, citizens' safety and all of them have a culprit: the West! The USA, the EU and NATO!

### c) Framing

**Evaluation elements:** *we were humiliated; Romania is a kind of reservation; History (ours)? A line of guilt; Faith? Never the essence, the spirit was so attacked; Mafia, cheats, ... I mean this is Romania today!; I imagined 2018, the Centenary year, as a year of change (...) alas, everything was the opposite, as in a nightmare!; The country of „peace and friendship” became a country under siege; History has become another mockery; the horrible thing raised from the money given by the inept town hall of the Bucharest capital, because that is a mockery, not a monument!*

**Words, expressions and phrases:** *apocalypse, greedy heads, „partners” and fake friends.*

**Catch phrases:** *An apocalypse in which the great whore, dressed in „freedom”, „democracy”, „progressivism”, „human rights” and „justice” came riding on an aberration with many greedy heads, called the Euro-Atlantic combination; Romanians are led to believe that Russia, to which glorious stages of (military) history link us ... but also Orthodoxy, a good part of the language - well Russia has become a „threat”!; Abusive arrests, including of children.*

**Visual elements:** there are few images. One of them associates the EU with the protests.

**Sources cited:** a journalist from Antena3 who presented a study that would have been carried out by the EU in 2014.

**Journalist's position:** very critical of Romania's strategic partners (the USA, NATO, the EU); the entire content of the articles is assumed by the author.

**Repetitive arguments:**

Foreigners are guilty: insincere partners, fake friends (indicated to be NATO, the USA and the EU) who came to Romania and imposed us incorrect and false rules and principles, took everything that Romania had more valuable; they are the cause of our unhappiness;

Helplessness: we are permanently lied to by Westerners, we feel guilty, we are constantly humiliated, treated as second-hand citizens, besieged; we are blasé;

Nostalgia: *Ceauşescu, the one who brought more peace in the world than all the presidents of his time in one place - and more development in Romania than all the other leaders in one place! (...) What a shame!;*

Conflict: *year of hatred; insults among all of us; the state powers are fighting each other; there are pressures; tensions and conflicts with neighbors or formerly partner countries of Romania (for example Russia).*

**Actors:** journalist, „fake partners” / occupants, governors, Romanians.

In order to identify frames, we go through the **recoding step**, contained in the table below.

Table 1

*Recoding*

Defining the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Romania has reached a deplorable state in all areas</li> <li>- Romania's leaders steal and let the country be destroyed</li> <li>- The communist era made important constructions and huge investments in infrastructure and left valuable artistic creations</li> <li>- Now, because of the US and NATO, Romania is regressing it remains a „reservation”, a „colony”. What is left in Romania is either under the control of the Americans/ Westerners or was sold or ceded to them entirely (including language, faith)</li> <li>- Corruption is actually a lie, an invention</li> <li>- Romanians are blasé</li> <li>- the USA and NATO are not sincere partners but blackmail us with the fight against corruption to ensure benefits for their multinationals</li> <li>- The presence of NATO bases is actually a military occupation</li> </ul>
The cause (and possibly associated actors)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involving foreigners, namely the US, NATO and the EU, who act together, coordinated</li> <li>- They have internal support points (which serve foreign interests). President Iohannis who is a foreigner (German, not Romanian),</li> <li>- Romanians are also guilty because they did not continue the achievements of the communist period</li> </ul>

Table 1

*Recoding*


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Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Romania is a kind of reservation</li> <li>- Foreigners destroy the country</li> <li>- We have reached the apocalypse, disaster is imminent</li> <li>- must buy armaments, give up the territories, where foreign military bases operate</li> <li>- The vocation of being Romanian was lost; that is, a welcoming, polite, educated man - and patriotic, even in the sense of pride in everything that is Romanian</li> <li>- 2018: I experienced a kind of year of the Romanian Apocalypse</li> <li>- We live in a state of permanent and widespread conflicts</li> </ul>
Values entered	Dignity, humility, powerlessness, patriotism, faith
Solutions (call to action):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the return to the situation and values of the Ceausist period</li> <li>- support of V. Dăncilă and other „patriots”, perceived as pro-Russians, who bring hope</li> </ul>
Frames	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• „<b>we don't sell our country</b>” (foreign oppressor)</li> <li>• “<b>we are no longer doing well</b>” (powerlessness, failure to progress and reconciliation with destiny)</li> <li>• „<b>before it was better</b>” (what was good in the old days, Ceausescu period)</li> <li>• “<b>the parallel state</b>” (National Anticorruption Directorate abuses)</li> </ul>

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**4.2. Identify mental models. Identify potential attitudes or behaviors****a) Situation models**

What is the **discursive event**? Debate on some press articles on the topic of the Centenary. The **subject**? The content of two articles from Sputnik about the Centenary. What resulted from the speech of the participants in the focus group? What **information** did they access and extract from the **episodic memory** of the subject?

The information about the media is defective, the students instantly associate media with television and they take over conclusive and general ideas, as well as truisms, conveyed in the public space: some TV (television) stations manipulate, others also tell the truth. The complete distrust of television results. But they did not come up with more concrete information, examples, or any study they had read. Or any previous debate, lecture or even discussion in the circle of friends. I encountered only one exception, namely a student who was more concerned about the subject because her friend was interested in the political and media fields. When talking about informing us, about information, students instantly referred to the news although to the direct question from where they are informed, they answered: the internet. Most are watching TV but they did not indicate it as a means of information. They have no information about what fake-news or misinformation means, except for what they've heard on TV about these issues. They accessed information from the episodic memory about news headlines, about love relationships promoted by sports TV channels, about Youtube channels that became very popular among young people.

Strictly referring to the article, they accessed information from memory about: “cheats” that have illegal businesses; the school that has no purpose; politicians without faculties; “We are taught to lie and copy as a child, this is what the school teaches us”; the situation of tourism in Romania, with explicit references to the deficient infrastructure and too high prices; the group or cultural native system: the behavior and attitude of the Turks towards their country (positive attitude, intonation of the state anthem in schools, etc.); the state anthem and knowledge of lyrics; Romanian symbols (Dracula, Hagi). They also evoked experiences during school, especially in the discipline of Civic Education, when they neglected the subject and the teacher. They did not access information about the Centenary; my explanation is that they do not have consistent information in the episode memory about the Centenary. They stopped mainly at the form in which the articles are written.

#### **b) Context models - Description of context models**

The participants in the focus group - first year students - are in an academic environment and have a discussion mediated by a teacher on a particular topic. The students have also participated in debates (not focus group but debate), they have similar experiences. In general, they know little about each other. The participants belong to that group of students, they are about the same age, predominantly girls. The school backgrounds are similar. Family or friends are not known. The constraints are given by the questions of the mediator (although general, open), by the academic environment (imposes a polite, non-appealing, relatively coherent language).

#### **c) Experience (events) models**

The representation of students about mass-media is that they manipulate, that each character has his opinion; students in fact do not like the diversity of opinions; opinions can only be true or false, there are no nuances. On the one hand, they perceive the media as having trivial, unimportant content, expecting to learn things from TV, on the other hand, they do not understand much of the content. They consider that the journalists are only looking for the audience, and they populate the news with unimportant details. Instantly they access the Internet if they want to find out something more about a topic that caught their attention. They consider Youtube to be correct, they are convinced that they are not manipulated when using it and that it is strictly their choice when accessing certain content, being influenced by nobody and nothing. They perceive the content of the articles in Sputnik that they read as **true** and their biggest problem was the way they were written. They did not understand any piece of information, but nevertheless they perceived it as true.

The central idea extracted from the articles was the degradation of Romania, the failure of the evolution of the Romanian society, a hundred years of failure. They felt a lot of dissatisfaction of author and a lot of frustration. At times, some of them explicitly empathized with the journalist. They said they found in the article what they already knew about the dysfunctions and anomalies in our society today. Thus, the dissatisfaction already existing in their mind is activated. It expresses frustration that *“we have no chance in Romania. This is the truth.”*



The article - by the style of writing and the frames used - provokes a lot of **emotions**. Negative ones. Mainly **irritation**, at least in the first phase. Irritation also because the Romanian people are attacked in hard-core identity (“*only bad things are said about us, are there really no good things to say?*”). Then **shame** (“*Shame. You read about yourself as a nation, read the article and you want to give up and do anything else, like crochet*”). Then **demobilization** and **disappointment** (“*It discourages me, demoralizes me, I stay and think I’d better go to another country*”; “*does not give you the idea of security*”).

Students' representation of the communicator instantly came: first of all, he is frustrated. Then, it is about a man, alone (unmarried), poor financial situation, mature, informed, nationalist (even communist), subjective, exaggerated at times („the year of the apocalypse”) but he is **sincere**. Without exception, the author is perceived as **sincere, genuine and credible**. They did not problematize that someone could be paid to write such articles. Some students have tried to find the journalist „mitigating circumstances” (“*maybe the man had unpleasant experiences with the authorities and that's why he is so upset*”). The only student who pointed out that the man was not a poor man was the one who had heard of Sputnik. He noted that the site looks good, is friendly, has enough publicity, attracts readers, especially old people; the author has an audience, otherwise he would not write. Students rushed to answer the question about the author, did not hesitate, which indicates that they have a well-defined representation of frustration / a frustrated person. They associated it with a socially non-adaptive person, perhaps a victim of social exclusion, especially because of poverty (stereotype stimulated by mass media, movies, etc.). One student associates communicator frustration with post-December disappointment in Romania. They consider elder people to be vulnerable to media manipulation. They do not consider that they can be manipulated. They do not check what they read or hear. No student checked the date of posting the articles, the author or the site.

Their representation about patriotism is to care about your country and want to do something for it. They did not use the item „patriotism” although it appeared in one of the articles but a part of students decided it is better and more useful to do something concrete and beneficial for the community and not just verbalize. A single student made some historical references, starting with the title of the article, related to the Centenary. His representation of the history of Romanian people in the last hundred years is that there were good things worth remembering. They have a negative representation about the education system, they consider that, “the criteria for accessing or graduating from some faculties are wrong, incorrect, you can buy everything and there is no real competition, based on knowledge.

## 5. Conclusions

The strongest frame is failure, “we are not doing well anymore”. It dominated the students' speech, activated information from the episodic memory about dysfunctional cases and situations in Romania (tourism, education) and associated the state of

Romania with a deplorable image. The predominant emotional reactions were foreseeable: demobilization, disappointment, shame. However, we also identified attitudes of rejection of the approach of communicator, some of the students saying that we should do something concrete for our country and that surely we could find many good things to say about it and many things which we could be proud of. However, we cannot associate these attitudes with school (as an education system). The positive examples offered by the students did not come from the knowledge accumulated in the school.

We did not identify visible reactions in the speech (so no mental model elements) activated by the frame “parallel state / National Anticorruption Directorate abuses” (I did not identify any correlation). No student referred to this topic in the articles, and no one associated the identified problem (failure) with the parallel state. Also, we did not identify direct correlations (information activated from the episode memory or representations) with NATO, the USA or the EU actions, the mental model does not include finding the guilty outside the country. So, the frame about the „foreign oppressor” and “we do not sell our country” did not generate reactions among the students. Maybe it's not culturally resonant enough with this age group, or maybe the students in the focus group don't have enough knowledge about what NATO and the EU mean. On the other hand, Russia was not mentioned either, probably for the same reason. No student explicitly problematized whether the negative information in the article about NATO, the USA and the EU is real or positive about Russia, but they appreciated the content of the articles as a whole as being true. Also, the „before was better” frame activated mental models in one case. This is explainable because our interlocutors are very young, born long after December 1989 (they do not have their own memories of the years of communism in Romania) and only those who grew up in a family environment where nostalgia for the communist period predominates could develop such a mental model (they would form representations of that period).

We appreciate that school (at least secondary school and high school) does not cultivate enough elements of Romanian identity, does not sufficiently promote Romanian values that students will acquire and internalize, - so it does not make propaganda in this sense, which reinforces our vulnerabilities as people and makes us permissive to foreign propaganda. Also, our research applied to a group of students has shown that school does not sufficiently cultivate critical thinking, does not teach children to problematize, to research and does not take seriously the disciplines in the social education spectrum; students did not problematize the correctness of the information in the articles, they did not check the content, the author or the site, they were aware of the emotion provoked only when they were asked if the reading of the articles had an emotional effect. They do not consider that they could be manipulated, misinformed (nor do they know very well what misinformation, propaganda, fake news mean) and, more than that, they are convinced that the choice of content and media channel is strictly their choice.

But, if at least one of the goals of the journalist was to generate negative emotion and demobilization and decrease commitment towards the country, values, etc., then at least partially or for a period of time, this goal is achieved. This is especially because students are not aware of the perverse effects of accessing this type of content.

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