

## THE STORY OF BRITISH PROPAGANDA FILM

Scott Anthony

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### Simon Matthews

**S**cott Anthony is Deputy Head of Research at the UK Science Museum. He has written several books, including studies of the documentary film units run by the GPO and Shell. *The Story of British Propaganda Film* is his latest publication and, although its remit is somewhat broader, it provides us with an account of the Central Office of Information (COI) Film Unit, from its genesis until its demise in 2012. As the title suggests, a rather wide definition of propaganda is applied, covering documentary films, wartime dramas and even 'swinging 60s' material. Toward the end of the narrative, it expands to include the struggle against radicalisation and disinformation on the internet.

But what do we mean by 'propaganda'? According to the 1912 *Concise Oxford Dictionary* it was '*efforts, schemes, principles of propagation (which is to disseminate a statement, belief or practice)*'. This clearly remains part of what most people would understand as being propaganda. However, consult the 2025 *Cambridge Dictionary*, and you get '*information, ideas, opinions, or images, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions (as in wartime propaganda)*'. So the definition has altered, and sharpened, over time, no doubt due to the role played by the mass media from the mid-twentieth century and its use by totalitarian – or just powerful – countries to promote their policies, irrespective of merit or context.

Dr Anthony uses the second definition, and to bolster this position quotes George Orwell's statement that 'All Art is Propaganda'. This is surely debatable. Is an artist painting a still-life, or a seascape, engaged in propaganda? He also goes on to describe Orwell as 'an anti-Stalinist socialist whose work has been appropriated by . . . British intelligence operatives'. The first part of this is undoubtedly true. Orwell, however, was not 'appropriated' by British intelligence services. He willingly co-operated with them, particularly in passing on the names of suspected

Communist fellow-travellers. Referring to the abolition of the Central Office of Information in 2011, Anthony also states (p. 20), 'The constraints on centralised state power that existed during the Cold War were unapologetically being cast off'. Which rather begs the question what were the constraints on centralised state power that existed during 'the Cold War'? Does he mean that the pre-1990 bureaucratic structures that carried out state policy – like the COI – were replaced, post-1990, with unaccountable private sector consultancies? If he does, it could have been put more clearly.

Moving away from the Introduction, a chronological approach is followed. We start in the 1930s with the General Post Office Film Unit. The chapter on the war contains an interesting vignette about Churchill's great interest in film. He had his own private cinema in which he watched many of the latest releases, frequently in tears, smoking furiously, sobbing and shouting at the screen. He sold Alexander Korda the rights to his autobiography *My Early Life* and may have written, or at least suggested, some of the dialogue that was used in *That Hamilton Woman*. Obviously, during wartime, the government wants a positive slant from whatever is being screened. At such times, pretty much anything produced could be categorizable as propaganda. But where should we place films like *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) and *The Way Ahead* (1944)? Both are fair-minded, understated and not particularly partisan.

Post-war there was an emphasis on documentaries stressing reconstruction – and a Colonial Film Unit that made films about the UK, for showing in the colonies, and films about the colonies, for showing in the UK. Labour invested heavily in this. Predictably, the Tories cut its budget in 1951, only to increase it substantially post-1956. By the 60s, the COI were producing work that highlighted contemporary Britain, its modernity and contribution to technology and the arts. One example of this, referenced in the text, is Don Levy's *Opus*, made for the Expo 67 World Exhibition. A magnificent celebration of architecture, dance, art, drama and music, and very much the image of the UK the Wilson government wanted to project, is it 'propaganda'? And doesn't everyone make promotional films like this?<sup>1</sup>

The Foreign Office's Information Research Department (IRD) is discussed in passing. They certainly played a substantial role in Cold War covert (and sometimes overt) propaganda. This was usually via the media, and occasionally ensuring that documentaries adhered to a

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<sup>1</sup> It can be viewed at <[https://archive.org/details/opus\\_20210917](https://archive.org/details/opus_20210917)>.

particular 'line'. Much of their work seemingly consisted of planting false, or highly misleading, stories in the press, denigrating certain authors (and politicians) whilst favouring others. A great deal of it was carried out abroad and is, thus, outside the scope of Anthony's book. It is debatable, anyway, if the generally less politically aware UK population of the 50s and 60s would have noticed such slants on whatever film or TV programme they were viewing.

He is on surer ground in Chapter Six, which discusses the on-going adulatory coverage of the Royal family. From the 1953 Coronation onwards, there were innumerable documentaries, TV appearances and endless coverage of Royal visits. The UK was saturated with an overblown, idealized, portrayal of their monarchy. Aside from dictatorships, no other country did anything similar. The way the material was (and is) presented promotes the idea that what is being seen on screen is exceptional, with the UK unique and very lucky to have such people as heads of state, titular or otherwise. Nor was it only Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II who was shown in operation: the COI had a film unit that followed the wider family around the world, paying special attention to the day-to-day activities of Prince Philip and Princess Margaret.

The output from the latter days of the COI come across, now, as being rather miserable. During the Thatcher years it was used to justify the dismantling and sale of national infrastructure, notably with the 1986 British Gas privatization adverts, which provided a cosy aesthetic – rather like Ridley Scott's Hovis advert – to an essentially destructive, right-wing policy. It was still around with the advent of New Labour who, ignoring (or, more likely, unaware of) the argument that a healthy public sphere requires a state-supervised balance with private business and lobbyists, brought the private sector into the COI. Its budget increased ten-fold to £500m pa, with consultants benefitting substantially. This being New Labour, inflated claims were made about the importance of cultural industries, rather than, say, manufacturing, and the new regime was, eventually, able to identify itself with some successes, notably *The King's Speech* (2010).

But there were flops too and, despite much talk about the 'Anglosphere', the UK Film Council, established by New Labour in 2000, didn't fund either the *Harry Potter* or *Paddington* franchises. Nor was it particularly involved with the Bond films, which despite certain amount of realism, continued to present English fantasies about 'unique capabilities' and 'punching above our weight'. Thus, it was hardly surprising to see the survival of the COI – still an 'in-house' government department, but now

with a budget that had ballooned out of proportion – treated with amusement and nostalgia by an in-coming coalition government, looking for easy savings in 2010. After all, why bother keeping it when you can just outsource everything directly?

Its abolition followed.<sup>2</sup> A simple, centrally based, accountable organization was lost. Its archive can presumably still be accessed via the British Film Institute, but such arrangements are not the same as having a carefully maintained repository of work available to all. Today the UK government continues to sponsor films, videos, YouTube clips and so on. Indeed, the 'war on terror' has led to increased activity in this field, as the state seeks to deal with social media that targets 'radicalisation' at vulnerable young people and 'disinformation' at everyone. Much of this is produced by the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU), which carries forward the work of the IRD. It has also been militarised via the British Army's 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade. In an era of hybrid warfare and cyber threats, this is understandable.

The author constructs his narrative in a highly intellectual fashion. Not many in the UK would reference Jurgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. He deserves praise for doing so, and in providing such a detailed account. On the other hand, he talks about 'the Israelification of society' and, at length, about support being given to the Syrian opposition in recent years. I have no idea what the former means, and have no way of judging the effectiveness of the latter. There is a lot in this book that is debatable, and some of it is probably wrong, but it is nicely presented and worth reading despite that.

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*He is currently writing a study of Winston Churchill's period as First Lord of the Admiralty 1939-1940, for publication in 2026.*

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<sup>2</sup> An idea of how comprehensive their output was can be seen at <<https://shorturl.at/JNDrq>> or <<https://archive.org/search?query=subject%3A%22Central+Office+of+Information%22>>. This lists a small selection of their work.