**From Propaganda to ‘Information’: Reforming Government Communications in Britain**

**Abstract**

Since the 1980s several studies of postwar British propaganda have been published. While many of these have focused on developments abroad, some have explored domestic work carried out under the auspices of the Central Office of Information. Established in 1946, the Central Office of Information provided a range of services to government departments, including advertising and public opinion polling, but it was just part of a wider system of official communications that has tended to attract less attention in the historiography. Reorganised by Clement Attlee’s postwar Labour governments, this system was presented to the public as a means of disseminating impartial and apparently non-controversial ‘facts’ about government policy. Few commentators today accept that justification, but little is known about why it emerged after the Second World War or what impact it had on existing communications machinery. Taking a broad view of the subject that considers the interwar and wartime antecedents to the postwar communications system, this paper seeks to fill in some of the gaps that have emerged in the literature. Focusing on shifts in official nomenclature and departmental practice, it explores the relationship propaganda shared to government policy and its broader legacy in the twentieth century.

**Keywords**

Central Office of Information, Attlee governments, propaganda, public relations, advertising, information services.

Shortly after taking the reins at 10 Downing Street, Clement Attlee introduced what he called a ‘new organisation’ of the information services. The dust had barely settled from the Second World War, and Britain’s new Prime Minister was keen to draw a line under an institution that had been formed to help prosecute it. The Ministry of Information (MOI), a central propaganda agency established at the outset of the war, was to be wound up and replaced with an ‘information unit’ whose work would be restricted to ‘certain common technical and production functions’.[[1]](#endnote-1) The information services, a term used throughout Whitehall to describe the collective endeavours of the government’s press officers, public relations officials and advertisers,[[2]](#endnote-2) would themselves be restructured, and a new and apparently more streamlined system of government communications would emerge.

Announcing these reforms to Parliament on 17 December 1945, Attlee was keen to stress the impact they would have on postwar reconstruction. Tasked with informing citizens about the ‘many matters in which Government action directly impinges on their daily lives’, the information services would spread impartial and apparently non-controversial ‘facts’ about government policy.[[3]](#endnote-3) The ‘information unit’, originally called the Central Information Office but renamed the Central Office of Information (COI) to avoid confusion with an American organisation,[[4]](#endnote-4) would provide a number of 'technical’ services to government departments, including advertising, public opinion polling and film and newsreel production, and the whole system would run on the circulation and dissemination of ‘information’, both between the COI and its departmental clients and between departments and the wider public they served.

Attlee’s announcement, which attracted little criticism in Parliament at the time, was met with considerably less warmth elsewhere. Suggesting that the 'British people can be kept “adequately informed” [of government policy] by a free and honest press', the *Daily Mail* responded to the reforms with an editorial that bluntly stated, 'Not worth it' (18 December 1945). A correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* also voiced concerns about the new system, claiming ‘Mr. Attlee…has put a weapon in the hand of any future Government’ (18 December 1945), and by 1946 attacks on the COI had become so prevalent that an internal government report warned of a crisis of morale.[[5]](#endnote-5) Critics of the new information office believed that it shared a little too much in common with its wartime predecessor, and that ‘information’ as defined by the Labour administration was little more than a cunning euphemism for propaganda.[[6]](#endnote-6) Yet the COI did have supporters, such as the journalist and academic Harold Greaves who published a book in 1947 that suggested that the growth of ‘educative publicity’ in Britain could be traced to the ‘greatly changed and enlarged needs of the twentieth-century state’ and the resulting desire to cultivate a ‘more intimate association between officials and…the public’.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Citizens’ right to information and the ‘duty’ of governments to provide it became a key *raison d'être* for the postwar information services, which survived a series of enquiries into their work and expenditure in the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.[[8]](#endnote-8) The Conservatives, who had repeatedly called for the abolition of the COI while in opposition, effectively endorsed the new information office after returning to power in 1951, and by the following decade something of a consensus had emerged within Whitehall regarding the need for politicians to ‘inform’ electorates. A series of official and semi-official publications helped to lend credence to this view,[[9]](#endnote-9) and even the normally reticent Royal Institute of Public Administration published a report in 1965 that claimed that politicians had an ‘obligation’ to tell citizens about their ‘duties and rights as householders, as consumers and as beneficiaries of the Welfare Society’.[[10]](#endnote-10) It was not until the 1980s, when the basic tenets of this society were called into question, that historians began to challenge past interpretations.

Driven by renewed interest in the institutions that produced and disseminated propaganda, much of the early work on the postwar information services explored their use as a tool of British diplomacy and as a means, in the words of one study, of ‘projecting socialism’ abroad.[[11]](#endnote-11) Yet it was not long before domestic publicity attracted serious historical attention. In a book published in 1989, William Crofts raised important objections to the supposedly neutral character of official promotion under the Attlee governments, suggesting that their campaign of ‘economic propaganda’ made a mockery of any claim to impartiality, and that their ‘information’ was in any case ‘intended to create or to maintain states of mind that are conducive to the required end’.[[12]](#endnote-12) In an article published the following decade, John Tulloch also poured scorn on the ‘self-serving myth’ that 1945 heralded a new era in official communications policy, arguing that this interpretation was ‘concocted for political convenience [and] serviced by an information establishment that stretched from the BBC, through Fleet Street and Reuters to the COI’.[[13]](#endnote-13) More recently, Mariel Grant has drawn attention to the ‘transitional role’ played by the MOI in the development of the postwar information services, arguing that the ‘fine line between party political propaganda and government information was sometimes blurred after 1945’.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The latter contributions have shifted the terms of debate from information to persuasion, highlighting the scale and reach of government propaganda in the aftermath of the war and its impact on civil society and the public sphere. Yet a number of areas remain under-explored. In particular, little is known about why ‘information’ became a means to both describe and justify the work of public relations officials, press officers and advertisers, how Attlee’s reforms were implemented across government, and what impact if any they had on those appointed to promote the state. Existing scholarship has tended to focus on specific institutions and on certain kinds of ‘information’, such as the anti-communist material circulated by the Foreign Office,[[15]](#endnote-15) but no attempt has been made to draw together the various strands of Labour’s reforms or chart their impact on the postwar political process. In a recent study on the origins of public relations in Britain, Scott Anthony has claimed that 1945 witnessed a ‘hardening of rhetoric’ and a ‘change in the style and scope of [the] public relations methods employed [by the state]’,[[16]](#endnote-16) but Labour’s attempt to *soften* the language of government communications is conspicuous by its absence.

Taking a broad view of the subject that considers a number of events leading up to 1945, this paper seeks to fill in some of the gaps that have emerged in the literature. Tracing the origins of Labour’s reforms to the interwar years, it considers why ‘information’ became a prominent feature of political rhetoric after the Second World War and what impact it had on existing communications machinery. Contextualising Attlee’s reforms in this way can reveal how the language used to describe propaganda shifted in response to specific circumstances and events. Just as ‘imperialism’ and ‘empire’ had been central to discussions of the British state in 1895-1914,[[17]](#endnote-17) ‘information’ became part and parcel of political discourse in the postwar era. Though the term had been used in an official context before,[[18]](#endnote-18) furthermore, it developed a lasting relationship to the social democratic state fashioned by the Attlee administration. This state, as one official was keen to point out in 1950, responded to the ‘general demand, from Members of Parliament, the Press, and other organs of opinion, that the country should be told “the facts”’.[[19]](#endnote-19) Yet it also used ‘information’ in an attempt to manufacture consent, introducing a system of government communications that remained part of the machinery of Whitehall until the COI was dissolved in 2011 by the coalition government of David Cameron.

**The Growth of Government Communications after the Great War**

Several arguments have been put forward to explain the emergence of this system of communications. According to Crofts, the Second World War provided the ‘impetus for the use of propaganda channels which up to then had been employed almost exclusively by commercial enterprises’.[[20]](#endnote-20) For Tulloch, the Attlee governments were responsible for a ‘postwar settlement’ in official information policy whereby the ‘supply of government information, exhortation and propaganda assumed a central role in the process of managing the country’.[[21]](#endnote-21) Grant has also drawn attention to the impact of the war in a recent study of the COI, although she claims that the ‘specific details’ of Labour’s reforms indicate that the ‘postwar organisation of government information in Britain had as much to do with pre-war developments, debates and problems as it did with the experience of the [war]’.[[22]](#endnote-22)

There are good reasons for believing that events between the wars helped to shape the structure of government communications in the postwar era. The MOI, on which the COI was modelled, owed its origins to a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence that began deliberations in 1935,[[23]](#endnote-23) and the network of departmental information divisions that the COI served can also be traced to the interwar years. Until fairly recently, the period between the wars tended to be regarded as one in which government propaganda was scaled back, at least in the domestic sphere.[[24]](#endnote-24) Yet that interpretation has been challenged by Grant, whose *Propaganda and the Role of the State in Interwar Britain* represented the first major study of the subject in the domestic sphere, and Scott, whose *Public Relations and the Making of Modern Britain* highlights the degree of experimentation and adaptation that underpinned government propaganda in the interwar years.

Citing official estimates on the cost and staffing of departmental information services, Grant has argued that there was a ‘considerable expansion’ in the use of domestic publicity in the period between the wars. Though much of the propaganda machinery erected during the Great War was dismantled in 1919, the rest falling prey to budget cuts triggered by the 1919-21 recession, certain departments continued to employ staff specifically for publicity purposes and their number appeared to grow through the 1920s and 1930s. In 1923, six ministries employed such staff, but by 1937 that figure had almost tripled to seventeen, suggesting that the ‘concept of official propaganda had been recognised as a legitimate function of government departments’ by the time Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September, 1939.[[25]](#endnote-25) (After the war, as we shall see, the number increased further to twenty-eight.)

Earlier accounts of the information services, such as Sir Fife Clark’s *Central Office of Information*, had portrayed the years leading up to the war as a time of ‘piecemeal’ development of departmental information divisions when little was done to ‘develop official information services to meet [the] normal needs of press and public’.[[26]](#endnote-26) Yet official records released after these accounts were published paint a different picture. Not only did multiple interwar departments appear to regard propaganda as central to their dealings with the public; propaganda was actively endorsed by leading figures in the postwar reforms. As Postmaster-General in the early 1930s, Attlee had turned to publicity in an attempt to defuse parliamentary criticism of his department, and his belief in the power of persuasion was shared by Herbert Morrison, who used advertising and market research to contest the London County Council elections of 1934 and 1937 and who has been credited by Peter Hennessy with being ‘among the first of Labour’s national figures to appreciate the dividend that could accrue from cultivating [good relations with] the Press’.[[27]](#endnote-27)

While government departments and political parties made regular use of propaganda during the interwar years, the practice also permeated the civil service. Since the late 1800s there had been a steady growth in the number of individuals employed by the state, with the remit of government also expanding in response to legislation such as the 1911 National Insurance Act.[[28]](#endnote-28) The increased visibility and presence of government in everyday life combined with greater expectations of voters (whose numbers had also snowballed in the wake of the 1918 Representation of the People Act and 1928 Equal Franchise Act) convinced many civil servants of the need to alter their approach to dealing with the public. In a pamphlet published in 1932, Sir Stephen Tallents, an influential figure within interwar government communications who had also played a leading role in the development of the British documentary movement and the introduction of Listener Research at the BBC, among other things, called on politicians to create a ‘school of national projection’ to improve the ways in which Britain promoted itself to the outside world. Such a ‘school’ would be comprised of a ‘small band of picked workers whose main interests shall be devoted to the study and practice of a new national art’ and whose exploitation of the mass media would enhance Britain’s standing across the globe.

To-day, as the result of scientific discovery, a people is known to its fellows by the impression which it makes upon them through the cable and the printing press, on the air, and upon the screen. If a nation would be truly known and understood in the world, it must set itself actively to master and employ the new, difficult and swiftly developing modes which science has provided for the projection of national personality.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Tallents’ proposals reflected growing concern within the civil service at the state of Britain’s diplomatic channels, but they were not limited to international relations and nor was Tallents alone in devoting time and resources to the question of publicity. The transport administrator Frank Pick, filmmaker John Grierson and Foreign Office official Rex Leeper also developed ideas about the uses of propaganda in government, and their work and others’ has been characterised by Anthony as a form of progressive ‘public relations’ that differed in both tone and content from the more brazen propaganda of the two world wars. While wartime propagandists had sought to actively manipulate and coerce citizens, ‘pockets of “progressive” government’ within the civil service in the 1920s and 1930s envisioned propaganda as a means of educating and informing citizens about the role of the state. Through an imaginative use of films, newsreels, posters and other media, this ‘emerging bureaucratic stratum’ came to symbolise a kind of ‘cultural Keynesianism’ within the civil service which was animated, according to Anthony, by the ‘same liberal ideals that inspired William [later Sir] Beveridge and John Maynard Keynes’.[[30]](#endnote-30)

While these ideals were defined in opposition to wartime propaganda, they were also routinely contrasted with conceptions of promotion that had emerged in the United States in the same period. British officials like Tallents were careful to distinguish between their work and ostensibly more garish practices of American ‘salesmanship’.[[31]](#endnote-31) They developed their own terminology to underline and enforce these distinctions, and portrayed British promotion as a didactic enterprise that helped to raise the educational standards and awareness of the general populace. Some, such as the ex-civil servant A. P. Ryan, writing in 1936 on the use of intelligence and public relations, claimed the British approach reflected typically ‘English’ qualities of reticence and discretion. ‘English people have a hearty and, to some extent, a healthy distaste for anything that savours of self-advertisement.’[[32]](#endnote-32)

Tallents himself certainly believed that his conception of propaganda, which he liked to call ‘projection’, differed from the kind of exhortation witnessed across the Atlantic, and certain departments to which he made noteworthy contributions, such as the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) and the General Post Office’s (GPO) Public Relations Department, seemed to embody the spirit of his philosophy. Set up by the Colonial Office in 1926, the EMB was concerned not so much with the vagaries of total war as with the need to promote trade and increase productivity within the Empire. Blending advertising, diplomacy and market research, it established its own Film Unit that was responsible for several critically acclaimed documentaries, commissioned a series of posters and other printed ephemera from well-known artists and designers such as Macdonald Gill, Austin Cooper and William (later Sir) Nicholson, and organised an elaborate programme of public events that included regular Empire ‘shopping weeks’ and Valentine’s Day telegrams.[[33]](#endnote-33)

As its Secretary, Tallents had exerted a powerful sway over the EMB’s work until its disbandment in 1933, but he was rehired the following year by the GPO, serving as its Director of Public Relations until an appointment to a similar position at the BBC in 1935. Like the EMB, the Public Relations Department of the GPO produced a diverse array of films, posters and other promotional materials, and there was a clear degree of continuity between the two organisations’ work, not least because the Film Unit of the EMB had been transferred to the GPO along with Tallents in 1934.[[34]](#endnote-34) Unlike the EMB, however, the Public Relations Department of the GPO soon became a model for other departments’ information divisions. Though the problems facing the GPO and the EMB were in some senses unique, the communications techniques these bodies developed could be applied to a wide range of areas. Public information films, for instance, could promote health and well-being just as readily as they might advertise trade, and posters could convey any appeal that officials wanted to imprint upon them. The more creative and imaginative use of propaganda within the GPO was, according to Grant, ‘instrumental in fostering the growth of public relations machinery throughout Whitehall’, and was also used as a source of inspiration when planning for the new MOI began in October, 1935.[[35]](#endnote-35)

It is worth noting that Tallents was involved in the planning of the new MOI and had been earmarked as its Director-General until he was forced out of office in the wake of the Munich Crisis.[[36]](#endnote-36) However, of even greater significance for the purpose of this study is the development of a new *language* of official communications that emerged alongside institutions like the EMB and represented an early attempt to redefine and reconceptualise government communications. In Parliamentary Votes from the mid-1920s onwards, official communications work was referred to not as a form of propaganda, but as a type of ‘publicity’, a word that contained none of the pejorative connotations that had enveloped ‘propaganda’ in the wake of the First World War and whose use is still common in official documentation today. Other terms also permeated the bureaucratic lexicon, including ‘projection’, a word that Tallents did a great deal to publicise, ‘public relations’, an Americanism apparently coined by the practitioner Edward Bernays [[37]](#endnote-37) (and rejected by certain postwar policymakers precisely because of its negative undertones), and ‘advertising’ and ‘salesmanship’, both products of the commercial world.

Outside of media theory, [[38]](#endnote-38) little attention has been devoted to the semantic shifts that accompanied the use of propaganda during this period, although several historians have commented on the opposition propaganda inspired in civil society during the interwar years and the impact this had on official attitudes towards the practice. As Michael Stenton noted in 1980, there was a hostility to ‘“propaganda” in the government and mandarinate of the period which is difficult to trace but very real’.[[39]](#endnote-39) Writing the following year, Phil Taylor also drew attention to the ‘overwhelming degree of prejudice against [the] continued use [of propaganda] in peacetime’, arguing that such opposition convinced interwar policymakers to abandon the ‘lead’ Britain had gained in the field during the Great War until planning for the new MOI began under the Committee of Imperial Defence in 1935.[[40]](#endnote-40)

There is certainly evidence, in the form of books, articles and public speeches, of widespread animosity towards propaganda between the wars.[[41]](#endnote-41) Yet that did not appear to thwart development of the practice. If anything, it seems to have encouraged a heightened awareness among civil servants and policymakers of the need to carefully present and justify official communications work. This awareness found a voice in debates about nomenclature and the proper terms and terminology needed to describe propaganda.[[42]](#endnote-42) Yet it also became a key concern for the Institute of Public Administration, a civil service staff association that published a series of investigations into propaganda in its own journal, *Public Administration*, that helped to shape debate and discussion on the subject in the 1930s.

Inviting individuals as diverse as T. S. Simey, lecturer in public administration at the University of Liverpool, Alexander Highet, Controller of Publicity at the GPO, and Sir Harold Bellman, chairman of the National Association of Building Societies, to comment on various aspects of the use of propaganda in government, the proceedings of *Public Administration* are worth noting if only because of their overwhelmingly positive stance towards official exhortation.[[43]](#endnote-43) So numerous were the endorsements for propaganda, indeed, that one well-known public relations scholar has claimed that the ‘evidence in *Public Administration* suggests that by the 1930s there was an understanding of the importance of good public relations to facilitate smooth administration’ that cut across local and national government.[[44]](#endnote-44)

To some contemporaries, propaganda would help to create a degree of ‘understanding’ between politicians and citizens, and several arguments were put forward to try to expedite such ‘understanding’. Alec Spoor, Public Relations Officer at the National Association of Local Government Officers, claimed that introducing a ‘*complete* and *popular* system of local government reporting’ would increase public interest in local authority affairs, thereby contributing ‘materially to administrative efficiency and economy’.[[45]](#endnote-45) C. G. Browne, Publicity Manager at the Brighton Corporation, drew a similar conclusion, arguing that ‘Government departments have found that they can no longer remain the aloof, mysterious and impersonal bodies most of them once were’, and that a key part of their work involved ‘keep[ing] the public in touch with policy and administration, and where necessary…seek[ing] and develop[ing] co-operation on the part of the tax-payer’.[[46]](#endnote-46)

If there were sound administrative reasons for seeking the ‘cooperation’ of the public, there were also, however, didactic ones. Governments, as Highet wrote on the eve of the Second World War, should not just publicise their work to voters. They should take steps to inform, educate and enlighten them as well.

[T]he comparatively recent setting up and rapid growth of publicity organisations within the Civil Service…[have] brought about a better understanding of the problems of government and public service. In so doing, they have removed misconceptions, reduced hostility and *awakened a consciousness of the political and social machinery of the country.*

The escalation of the crisis in Europe, growth of trade unionism and emergence of mass political movements could all be used to explain increasing public sensitivity towards politics. Yet Highet believed that Whitehall ‘publicity’ organisations had played a leading role in bringing ‘traditionally aloof departments much closer to the public’, and had done so through a ‘subtle form of publicity…[that] couches its message in terms of sweet reasonableness’. Like other commentators, he was aware of the public hostility towards propaganda, a term which, he claimed, possessed a ‘rather unpleasant significance’, but he nevertheless believed that ‘propaganda…in its present-day usage merely connotes “education”’.[[47]](#endnote-47)

 Browne also underscored the educational and informative function of propaganda, claiming that it helped promote an ‘atmosphere of confidence on the part of the public that their interests are being faithfully observed [sic]’, encouraged public participation in political affairs, and ensured citizens had the ‘full information not only of their “rights” but also of their duties and responsibilities [as well]’.[[48]](#endnote-48)

It is not hard to see a similarity between these ideas and the arguments expounded by Labour after the war. However, it is important to distinguish between what supporters of the information services said and the actual *work* of civil servants and policymakers between the wars. Studies of the government’s role in events such as the General Strike have shown a commitment not to the free provision of information, but to its suppression and manipulation.[[49]](#endnote-49) Different departments also developed their own procedures for dealing with propaganda, and sometimes even their own terminology. The Foreign Office, for instance, had grown accustomed to using the terms ‘news’ and ‘publicity’ when describing diplomatic activities that involved some form of mediated persuasion, whereas the GPO (a commercial business as well as a major government department) favoured ‘public relations’.

When planning for the MOI began in the mid-1930s, the advantages and disadvantages of these terms and the contrasting models of government communication they seemed to imply were debated by the group of officials tasked with drawing up a blueprint for the new ministry. As Temple Willcox has shown, Tallents favoured a large-scale, centralised propaganda ministry that embodied the principles of ‘projection’ as he envisioned it, while Leeper believed that any propaganda work should be modelled on the more discreet ‘publicity’ activities of the British Council. Publicity, as Willcox notes, had come to mean ‘a distinctive approach [to propaganda] that in content was cultural rather than political’, and which emphasised ‘delicacy and subtlety’ rather than excessive enthusiasm. The matter came to a head in 1938, when both Leeper’s and Tallents’ plans were rejected by the sub-committee charged with overseeing the MOI,[[50]](#endnote-50) but the issue of terminology resurfaced again when the future of the MOI was debated in the early 1940s.

After it had released, withdrawn and subsequently re-released information concerning the Queen’s travel arrangements in September 1939, the MOI became the subject of stern criticism in parliament and the object of some ridicule in the press. Famously parodied in Evelyn Waugh’s *Put Out More Flags* (1942), the new Ministry nevertheless became an integral component of the state’s wartime communications machinery, producing films, running major advertising campaigns and assisting other government departments that wished to make use of its services. Divided into a series of Divisions overseen by Controllers, the MOI became a kind of central clearing house for official ‘information’. Its perceived success at managing information towards the end of the war also provided a rationale for continuing the body in peacetime or at least replacing it with an equivalent organisation.

**The Development of a Postwar Information ‘System’**

Like many postwar political developments, the COI owes its origins to wartime deliberations. As early as 1942, the question of what would become of the MOI in peacetime was raised in Whitehall, and by November 1943 postwar planning had begun in force in response to a directive from the Prime Minister. Despite its faltering start the MOI had grown in stature during the war, and there were several senior figures within the department who wished to see it continue in peacetime. However, the prevailing consensus within the wartime coalition was that the information ministry would need to be dismantled as soon as hostilities ceased. In 1944, a group of civil servants led by the under-secretary to the Treasury Sir Alan Barlow was asked to devise a schedule to determine precisely when this should happen, and to consider whether a case could be made for retaining some form of central machinery to coordinate official promotion. The latter question, as Grant has noted, ‘left the door open’ for further debate, and led to a string of exchanges in Whitehall that are worth exploring if only because of their bearing on the postwar reforms.[[51]](#endnote-51)

As had been the case in the planning of the MOI, wartime policymakers couched their recommendations in terms of the reputational problems that propaganda created for governments and the *terminological* difficulties of describing and presenting this kind of official communications work. As Barlow himself said in correspondence with Norman Scorgie, Controller of His Majesty’s Stationary Office (HMSO), the ‘field [of government communications] is [one] where parliamentary feeling is particularly sensitive’, and the ‘purely executive and innocuous character’ of any department created out of the shell of the MOI would ‘have to be made abundantly clear to Parliament’.[[52]](#endnote-52) Barlow even broached the prospect of combining this new-fangled body with HMSO, but that drew an angry retort from Scorgie who, while acknowledging the need for ‘publicity’ in peacetime, complained about the impact such a merger would have on the reputation of *his* department.

There are obvious risks to our non-political status in the Stationary Office name being the guarantee that what is retained of the existing Ministry of Information will be (in your words) “purely executive and innocuous”, and it is on our non-political status…that our publicity efficiency really depends.[[53]](#endnote-53)

The state’s in-house printer, HMSO published an array of official documentation (including Hansard) and had occupied a place in the machinery of government that dated back to the time of King George III. Its reputation for impartiality could be explained partly by the kinds of materials it printed, and partly by its status as a ‘common service’ agency that was overseen by civil servants rather than a presiding Cabinet minister. Common service agencies were charged with providing services to other government departments,[[54]](#endnote-54) and Barlow’s committee envisaged a new organisation ‘with some such title as the Government Information Bureau’ that would build on the existing common services of the Stationary Office but whose work would extend far beyond the realm of printed media.[[55]](#endnote-55) Before the war, HMSO had published booklets, leaflets and posters for a range of government departments, but the information bureau Barlow proposed would also produce films, arrange exhibitions, distribute press releases, coordinate local and national advertising campaigns, and organise tours for overseas visitors and diplomats.

After a lengthy consultation process that involved both the MOI and a number of other departments that had historically taken an interest in ‘information’ work, Barlow presented a report to the War Cabinet in June 1944 that detailed his committee’s recommendations for postwar publicity. Advocating the retention of the MOI until hostilities had ended,[[56]](#endnote-56) he called for the establishment thereafter of a ‘new Department (to be called perhaps the Government Information Agency) which would occupy the same sort of place in the machinery of government as is occupied by the Stationary Office or the Government Actuary [today]’. This agency, Barlow claimed, would carry ‘no vestige of the security and censorship functions of the war-time Ministry of Information’, although it would continue many of the latter’s functions and would be tasked, like the MOI before it, with ‘securing publicity and goodwill for Britain abroad and for the Government’s policy at home’.[[57]](#endnote-57)

Distinguishing between the MOI and the kinds of activities it carried out would allow a future government to continue wartime propaganda work under the banner of a new department. ‘The Ministry of Information’, Barlow claimed, had ‘made an unfortunate start, but in the light of experience they have now built up an organisation, and developed a technique, which was impressive in the extreme’. Thus while there could be ‘no doubt [that] an elaborate or blatant Government publicity policy on the home front would in peace time arouse suspicion and antagonism’, Barlow’s committee nevertheless took it ‘as certain that Government public relations work, which was growing in importance before the war, will continue on a considerable scale in peace’, with many of the functions of the MOI being ‘permanently maintained…as a common service to the Government as a whole’.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Barlow’s report triggered a heated debate within Whitehall regarding the future direction of government publicity. Some observers, such as the Postmaster-General Harry Crookshank, believed that continuing any aspect of the MOI’s work in peacetime would give ‘too great Governmental power over public opinion…[a] road that all the dictators have travelled’.[[59]](#endnote-59) The Minister of Information, Brendan Bracken, also called for the complete liquidation of his department after the war, and tried unsuccessfully to have this done before the conclusion of the Allied campaign in the East. Morrison, then Home Secretary, put forward a contrasting view, advocating not only a continuation of certain aspects of the wartime propaganda machinery, but a greater degree of coordination between the various departmental information divisions as well. The war had shown, he said, ‘the need…[for] the proper development [of publicity and public relations] in peace[time]’.[[60]](#endnote-60)

There was an understated political flavour to this debate that would become more significant after the war. However, it is worth noting that the final decision on the future of the MOI was actually taken by Winston Churchill, who endorsed the key recommendations of Barlow’s report and effectively closed the matter until Attlee assumed the premiership in July.[[61]](#endnote-61) Soon after returning to power, Labour initiated their own review of the information services and asked staff of the MOI to prepare a memorandum detailing their recommendations in advance of a cabinet meeting scheduled for mid-September. A new Minister of Information, E. J. Williams, and Director-General, Eric Bamford, had been appointed with the change of government, and both men put forward a strong case not for a new information department but for the retention of the *existing* one. Williams even sent Attlee a letter imploring the latter not to ‘act as a liquidator’,[[62]](#endnote-62) and claimed that the only significant obstacle to retaining the MOI was the ‘political objection…that under Party government it is wrong for the party in power to use the taxpayers’ money to persuade the voter to adhere to the party line’. Dismissing the latter criticism as something that had ‘loomed rather larger than [it] deserved’, Williams rationalised his stance with an appeal to the sanctity of ‘information’. Though propaganda may attract ‘political controversy’, this should not

preclude the Government of the day from explaining to the public at home the factual background of the national and international issues which Government policy has to face, nor from making known and understood those measures which flow from accepted Government policy... it is right to provide an information service at home as a means towards the proper working of a democratic community.[[63]](#endnote-63)

Williams’ views were echoed by Morrison, who authored a memorandum in advance of the cabinet meeting in September warning against a ‘return to the old timidity and reticence in relations between Government Departments and the public and the press’.[[64]](#endnote-64) Though he did not support the continuation of the MOI, which had developed a reputation for ‘*undisguised* Government propaganda’, Morrison did believe that governments should be permitted to ‘convey to the public the facts, pleasant and unpleasant, which are necessary for the understanding of “operative” Government policy’.[[65]](#endnote-65) Invited by Attlee to oversee the development of the information services in peacetime after the decision to abolish the MOI was agreed by the cabinet on 3 October 1945, Morrison, now Lord President of the Council, presented a report to the cabinet on 15 December that contained six proposals. There should be a continuation of overseas and domestic publicity, introduction of machinery to ensure that a ‘common line’ between different kinds of publicity was achieved, a return of control over departmental publicity to individual ministries, a ‘substantial reduction’ in overall expenditure on government propaganda, and a new organisation that would ‘carry out centrally certain common technical and production functions’.[[66]](#endnote-66)

‘Technical and production functions’ was a euphemism for newspaper, magazine and poster advertising, films and newsreels, exhibitions and trade fairs, and pamphlets, booklets and other printed media. During the war the MOI had specialised in the production of such promotional materials, and the ‘Central Information Office’ Morrison envisaged would continue most of this work in peacetime. Indeed, so much of the MOI’s activities would be transferred to the COI or the Foreign Office, whose News Department increased in size from ten to 289 staff between 1944 and 1946,[[67]](#endnote-67) that it is difficult to imagine how a ‘substantial reduction’ in expenditure could be achieved. Morrison’s recommendations were nevertheless endorsed by the Cabinet and the COI came into being on 1 April 1946, bringing to a conclusion a long period of review that had begun four years earlier.

As the first central propaganda agency to operate in Britain in peacetime, the COI has attracted a wealth of attention, not least because it was involved in promoting postwar economic policy.[[68]](#endnote-68) Yet it was not the only innovation with which the postwar Labour administration can be credited. In keeping with the desire to impose a ‘common line’ on the various branches of the information services, a review of the recruitment, promotion and remuneration of information staff was ordered by the Treasury in November, 1946. Chaired by Sir James Crombie and including the Director General of the COI, Sir Robert Fraser, among its members, the committee tasked with conducting the review made a series of sweeping recommendations for the reform of departmental information divisions which further demonstrated the centrality of ‘information’ to the postwar political process. Calling for the creation of one ‘Information Service’ across government, they believed that replacing existing Public Relations Departments and Press Offices with ‘Information Offices’ and establishing an entirely new class of civil servant, the ‘Information Officer’, would not only improve inter-departmental coordination but boost the professional status and standing of information staff as well. A change in terminology, as had been the case before the war, would be required to push through the reforms.

We have heard opinions that the term “Public Relations” should continue to be used in preference to that of “Information”, and we have heard others in the contrary sense. Although it is arguable that the term “Public Relations” is more comprehensive, yet we are of the opinion that the balance is in favour of the term “Information”, especially if the departmental divisions are to be regarded as forming with the Central Office a unified Information Service.[[69]](#endnote-69)

In August 1949, after a lengthy consultation process involving the Institution of Professional Civil Servants, recruitment of information officers began, with the first appointments made the following year.[[70]](#endnote-70) The transition from ‘public relations’ to ‘information’, however, did not proceed so smoothly. A number of departments raised objections to the new nomenclature, and by November 1947 only seventeen out of a total of twenty-eight ministries had changed the titles of their information divisions. The reluctance of the rest to follow suit presented a problem for Morrison who, like the Crombie Committee, felt that a shift in the language of government propaganda would help to promote public acquiescence of the practice. ‘Public relations’, he claimed in a memorandum addressed to all departments that had declined to embrace the new terminology, was a ‘pretentious term borrowed from the American commercial world’, whereas ‘information’ was ‘simpler and less open to objection’.[[71]](#endnote-71) A representative from the War Office disagreed, claiming the Army had ‘built up a very good atmosphere with the Press and with the public under the present title’ and that there was no ‘great reason for altering it’, while an official from the Stationary Office expressed concerns that an indiscriminate use of ‘information’ might lead outsiders to regard all information officers as ‘agents’ of the COI.[[72]](#endnote-72)

This ‘long contest over nomenclature’, as one observer described it,[[73]](#endnote-73) did not end well for Morrison. Many departments continued to resist his call to alter the titles of their information divisions, and by the 1950s Public Relations Departments were still operating in Whitehall.[[74]](#endnote-74) The term ‘information service’, however, entered the official lexicon and was used unsparingly and for the most part uncritically in a range of postwar literature. In his own premature account of the history of the civil service, for example, E. N. Gladden claimed that civil servants were becoming ‘much more aware of the need for public understanding of their work and the Departments’ information services are designed with this as a major objective, and certainly not for purposes of propaganda, as ill-disposed critics have sometimes alleged’.[[75]](#endnote-75)

**Promoting Reforms and Reorganisations after 1945**

Did Labour’s reforms change the way in which politicians and civil servants communicated with the public, or was official ‘information’, as Harold Macmillan put it in the spring of 1948, ‘not information at all…just propaganda’?[[76]](#endnote-76)

As noted above, many of the MOI’s wartime functions were hived off to the COI so there are good reasons for endorsing Tulloch’s argument that Labour ‘wholeheartedly embraced the maintenance of an enormous peacetime machine for publicity, propaganda and news management’ that could be traced to the war. This ‘machine’ was maintained despite the ‘private qualms and public demurrals of politicians’,[[77]](#endnote-77) and though there were important distinctions between the COI and its wartime predecessor (the former does not appear, for instance, to have censored any news) both organisations were tasked with managing the flows of information into and out of the state. The COI did this in a number of ways. Its News Distribution Service, for example, became a portal through which all government press releases were issued, and its regional offices (of which there were nine located in different parts of the country) employed press officers to liaise with local newspapers and broadcasters. Social Survey, an organisation that had been mired in a ‘snooping’ controversy during the war (when it was known as the Wartime Social Survey), was continued in peacetime under the COI with a brief to gather information on public opinion, and was soon joined by a number of specialist ‘production’ Divisions that included an Advertising Division handling all ‘paid’[[78]](#endnote-78) publicity, a Publications Division producing booklets, pamphlets and magazines, and the Crown Film Unit.

The COI was of course only part of the machinery erected to sell the state, and no examination of Labour’s communications reforms would be complete without consideration of the work of departmental information divisions. These divisions, as we have seen, operated independently of the COI and were responsible for a broad array of official publicity. Most were divided into three sections, dealing with press relations, paid publicity and intelligence respectively, and seven employed more than fifty staff overseen by a Chief Information Officer who answered directly to the Permanent Secretary or presiding Minister.[[79]](#endnote-79) As the main point of contact between a department and the public, information divisions handled all enquiries from citizens and journalists, instigated advertising campaigns (usually in conjunction with the COI), and conducted research into public opinion. All told, more than 1,000 were employed by government ministries to carry out information work in 1947, with a further 1,600 retained by the COI.[[80]](#endnote-80) Their number was so great, in fact, that a Treasury inquiry was launched in 1948-9 to explore ways of reducing expenditure; by 1950, according to parliamentary estimates, costs had been reduced.[[81]](#endnote-81)

Given their pledge to dismantle wartime propaganda machinery, it is not hard to see why the Conservatives criticised Labour in parliament for failing to curb the growth of the information services, or why supporters of those services often referred to them as a ‘system’ whose cogs and wheels touched every corner of Whitehall. In the six-year period that followed Labour’s election victory, 100,000 public lectures, 30 national advertising campaigns, 170 exhibitions and more than 500 films were produced,[[82]](#endnote-82) with much of this material overseen by a series of official and ministerial committees set up at the behest of Morrison in the aftermath of the war. Comprised of senior civil servants and Cabinet ministers, these committees continued the central oversight over government communications that had previously been province of the MOI, although they attracted little attention in parliament while doing so and have received only passing references in the literature since then.

Indeed, despite the scale of Labour’s propaganda work historical scholarship on the subject remains patchy at best. Most historians have gravitated towards the Information Research Department, a clandestine Cold War propaganda agency set up by the Foreign Office in 1948,[[83]](#endnote-83) but little is known about the less secretive and more parochial propaganda of institutions like the Ministry of Health or the Service departments. Crofts’ *Coercion or Persuasion?*, still the most comprehensive study of the subject, provides an interesting insight into the ways in which Labour used propaganda to bolster their programme of nationalisation, but it is concerned primarily with the economy and thus passes over other areas of domestic policy, such as those associated with the development of the postwar welfare state.

When universal national insurance and a National Health Service came into being in the summer of 1948, they were publicised with a 32-page booklet delivered to all households in the country explaining the principles of the new insurance scheme, a leaflet encouraging every citizen to register with a doctor, and a short animated film, *Your Very Good Health* (1948), that portrayed the NHS as the latest in a long line of ‘public health services’.[[84]](#endnote-84) As part of a drive to improve public health in advance of the establishment of the NHS, the Ministry of Health’s Information Office had earlier authorised *Coughs and Sneezes* (1945), *Don’t Spread Germs* (1945) and *Modern Guide to Health* (1947), and it was not the only department to use film to promote policy. In *Pedestrian Crossing* (1948), the Ministry of Transport sought to reduce road accidents by encouraging members of the public to use pedestrian crossings; the Treasury released *Pop Goes the Weasel* (1948) in the same year to illustrate how tax income was spent, and the COI even released a film, *Shown by Request* (1947), which self-referentially described how official films were produced.

Public health and road safety campaigns seemed to some observers to be politically benign, and were often held up as examples of the harmless ‘facts’ which the information services disseminated. Yet to some critics, even animated health films were tainted by political bias. As Kenneth Pickthorn, Conservative MP for Cambridge University, put it in a debate on the funding of the information services in May 1948, ‘every fact…every piece of truth issued, is helpful to their party and damaging to ours’.[[85]](#endnote-85) To counter such accusations, supporters of the information services tended to appeal to the democratising force of information and to the obligation of those in power to convey to the people the ‘facts’ to help expedite Britain’s recovery. In a ‘modern democratic society’, as one Labour MP said in 1948,

it is essential that people should know…the real facts of our economic situation at any given time…the dissemination of facts inside and outside of any country is one of the vital pillars on which the peace of the world rests.[[86]](#endnote-86)

If ‘facts’ were central to world peace and the well-being of the nation, however, how they were presented and which facts were presented was ultimately determined by the government. During the war, Barlow had stressed the importance of presenting facts ‘accurately and attractively’,[[87]](#endnote-87) and many of the objections to the information services raised in subsequent years concerned their tendency to accentuate the positive, to cherry-pick statistics that supported the party in power, and to utilise media such as animated films and public opinion polls that seemed ill-suited to the formal milieu of parliament. In some cases, the *form* that official propaganda took attracted as much attention as its content; in others, it was not so much the ‘facts’ that upset the Opposition as the policies that underpinned them.

Many of Labour’s landmark reforms, such as the overhaul of existing planning legislation,[[88]](#endnote-88) benefitted from the oxygen of official publicity, and some were not only opposed in parliament but criticised by the industries affected, which organised their own counter-propaganda campaigns. In 1946, the Railways and Road Haulage Association ran a series of press advertisements attacking nationalisation, and in 1949 the Cement Makers Association delivered leaflets and displayed posters promoting the same message. One campaign for the sugar industry organised by Aims of Industry, an anti-nationalisation lobby group that prided itself on its ‘non-political’ status, was deemed so damaging to the government that two abortive attempts were made by the Ministry of Food and the Treasury to stop it.[[89]](#endnote-89)

Critics of the COI, it is worth remembering, often contended that any centralisation of government communications would lead to a narrowing of opinions: a so-called ‘Goebbelisation’ of politics that would undermine free expression and opinion.[[90]](#endnote-90) Yet the anti-nationalisation campaigns of the late 1940s indicate that Labour’s ‘information’ may have spurred private enterprise to improve and refine *their* communications work. That is certainly the conclusion drawn by Jacquie L’Etang, who argues that the experience of total war contributed towards the professionalization of public relations in Britain and convinced both governments and corporations to devote more time and resources to improving their relations with the public.[[91]](#endnote-91) By the 1950s, commercial advertising and public relations practitioners had also begun to extol the virtues of ‘information’ when justifying their professions, and the argument even appeared to hold some water with Lord Beveridge, who praised the ‘service of advertising to the community’ at a conference in 1951.[[92]](#endnote-92)

**Conclusion**

In the event, and despite their frequent attacks on the COI, the Conservatives did not seriously alter the system of information services bequeathed to them by the Attlee administrations. It is true that the budget for the information services was cut in the 1950s, and that the Crown Film Unit was abolished, but these measures followed the recommendations of an enquiry set up by Labour in 1948,[[93]](#endnote-93) and Churchill’s second government ultimately followed in the footsteps of his first, retaining the COI as a central ‘technical’ agency and continuing the departmental information divisions that had operated in government in one form or another since the First World War.

Given the continuities between Labour and Conservative policy on information, it would be tempting to regard the reforms of 1945 as a manifestation of the postwar consensus that, for some, characterised British politics in the middle of the century. Yet it is important to recognise that the information services outlasted any semblance of consensus among the major political parties. Margaret Thatcher used the COI to promote the British policy of nuclear rearmament in the early 1980s,[[94]](#endnote-94) while Tony Blair marshalled an army of public relations officials (then known as ‘spin doctors’) to endorse British military interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq.[[95]](#endnote-95) In some cases the language used to describe the work of these individuals changed, but the guiding principles appear to have remained broadly similar. While Attlee turned to the journalist Francis (later Lord) Williams to act as his personal press secretary,[[96]](#endnote-96) for instance, Thatcher used Bernard Ingham and Blair Alistair Campbell. The COI, for its part, remained a common service agency responsible for the production of all kinds of publicity materials until it was dissolved as part of an austerity drive triggered by the financial crash of 2007-8. Nevertheless, as had been the case in 1945, many of its functions were simply transferred elsewhere.[[97]](#endnote-97)

Viewed in this light, Labour’s attempts to make the information services an important and permanent feature of government were clearly a success, and reflected a growing belief within the political establishment that governments should play a leading role in publicising their affairs. Expressed in a range of official debates and discussions, this belief was not, however, accepted by the majority of civilians who tended to regard official ‘information’ with a degree of suspicion and scepticism. Faced with contradictory ideas about the nature and purpose of propaganda, policymakers in the 1940s tried literally to change the terms of the debate, substituting ‘information’ for ‘propaganda’ to avoid the pejorative connotations associated with the latter term and distancing themselves from the apparently ‘American’ practice of public relations. As criticisms of Labour’s reforms suggest, this rhetorical sleight of hand was not entirely successful, but it did influence a great deal of postwar commentary on the information services and became a stock defence for government propaganda long after Labour lost power in 1951. As John Major said in a parliamentary debate on the cost of the official publicity in 1989, ‘It has long been accepted by successive Governments that they have a responsibility to ensure that members of the public are properly and fully informed about their rights, entitlements, responsibilities and duties’.[[98]](#endnote-98) Propaganda, in other words, was not just an essential task of the state, but a pre-requisite for a healthy democracy as well.

**Notes**

1. . *Hansard*, v. 417, c. 916, 17 December 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . See Monck, *How Civil Service Works*; Campbell, *Civil Service in Britain*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . *Hansard*, v. 417, c. 916, 17 December 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . The American Confederation of Industrial Organisations. I am indebted to John Tulloch for this observation. See ‘Policing the Public Sphere’, 364. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Robert Fraser, Director General of the COI and author of the report, attributed the crisis to ‘prolonged anxiety about [the] future’ of the information office. Cited in Clark, *Central Office of Information*, 35-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . In a parliamentary debate, the former Minister of Information Brendan Bracken accused the COI of ‘perspiring, pointless propaganda’, even comparing it to the German *Propagandaministerium*. *Hansard*, vol. 465, c. 971, 23 May 1949. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Greaves, *Civil Service Changing State*, 64 & 226. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Many of these enquiries occurred at times of political and economic crisis. After the debacle in Suez, for instance, a major review of the organisation of overseas information services was ordered by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Dr Charles Hill. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . See, for example, Critchley, *The Civil Service Today*; Monck, *Civil Service Works*; and Clark, *Central Information Office*. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . See Ogilvy-Webb, *The Government Explains*, 199. Files of the Administration can be accessed via the Special Collections Department at the University of Birmingham. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . Anstey, ‘Projection of British Socialism’; see also Smith, ‘Covert British Propaganda. For a review of the historiography of propaganda, see Chapman, ‘The Power of Propaganda’. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. .Crofts, *Coercion or Persuasion?*, 232 & 12-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . Tulloch, ‘Policing the Public Sphere’, 364. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . Grant, ‘Towards a Central Office’, 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . Fletcher, ‘British Propaganda World War’; Carruthers, ‘A Red Under Every’; and Shaw, ‘The Information Research Department’. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *.* Anthony, *Public Relations and Britain,* 174. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . Thompson, ‘The Language of Imperialism’. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . Most notably in the Department and later Ministry of Information in 1917-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . Leslie, referring to economic propaganda, in ‘Work of Economic Information’, 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Crofts, *Coercion or Persuasion?*, 250. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . Tulloch, ‘Policing the Public Sphere’, 365. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . Grant, ‘Towards a Central Office’, 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . On the MOI, see McLaine, *Ministry of Morale*; and Balfour, *Propaganda in War*. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. . See, for example, Taylor, ‘If War Should Come’; and Stenton, ‘British Propaganda’. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *.* Grant, *Propaganda and the State*, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. . Clark, *Central Office*, 25-6; see also Ogilvy-Webb, *The Government Explains*, 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. *.* Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51*, 199; see also Donoghue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. . According to figures cited by Anthony, the civil service grew in size from 280,900 staff at the start of the interwar years to 387,400 in 1939. *Public Relations and Britain*, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. . Tallents, *The Projection of England*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. . Anthony, *Public Relations and Britain*, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. . Tallents, ‘Salesmanship in Public Service’, 259. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. . A. P. Ryan had previously worked for the EMB, before taking up a post in the private sector for the Gas Light and Coke Company. See ‘Intelligence and Public Relations’, 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. . On the political and economic ramifications of the EMB, see Self, ‘Treasury Control and Empire’. For miscellaneous studiesof its propaganda, see Constantine, *Buy and Build* and ‘Bringing the Empire Alive’; Cronin, ‘Selling Irish Bacon’; and Chan, ‘Remember the Empire’. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. . For an account of the GPO Film Unit and its reincarnation as the Crown Film Unit in 1940 under the MOI, see Anthony and Mansell, *The Projection of Britain*. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. . Grant, *Propaganda and the State*, 83. When a Home Publicity Sub-Committee was formed to consider the organisation of domestic propaganda in 1938, E. T. Crutchley, Head of the GPO Publicity Department that Tallents had helped to create, was invited to attend. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. . Willcox, ‘Projection or Publicity?’, 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. . John and Lamme, ‘Evolution of an idea’. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. . See, for example, Taithe and Thornton, ‘Propaganda: Misnomer for Rhetoric’; and Corner, ‘Mediated Politics, Promotional Culture’. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. . Stenton, ‘British Propaganda’, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. . Taylor, ‘If War Should Come’, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. . See Russell, *Free Thought Official Propaganda*; Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in War*; Ponsonby, *Falsehood in War-Time*; and White, *The New Propaganda*. For a recent review of this literature, see Gullace, ‘Allied Propaganda and War’. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. . As Tallents told an audience of the Institute of Public Administration in July 1933,

“Propaganda” since the war has been a term of ill-fame, which the recent creation by Germany of a “Ministry for the Enlightenment of the People and For Propaganda” scarcely serves to mitigate. “Publicity” is not altogether an agreeable claimant to its succession. I have myself a fancy for the word “Projection”. ‘Salesmanship in Public Service’, 259. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. . See, for example, Simey, ‘A Public Relations Policy’; Highet, ‘Public’s Part in Administration’; and Bellman, ‘Traditions of Public Services’. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. . L’Etang, ‘State Propaganda and Intelligence’, 417. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. . Spoor was one of three individuals invited to discuss the public’s role in administration. See ‘Public's Part in Administration’, 150, 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. . Browne, ‘Public’s Part in Administration’, 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. . Highet, ‘Public’s Part in Administration’, 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. . Browne, ‘Public’s Part in Administration’, 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. . See, for example, Seaton, ‘Reith and Denial Politics’. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. . Willcox, ‘Projection or Publicity?’, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. . Grant, ‘Towards a Central Office’, 51-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. . T 222/68: Barlow to Scorgie, 16 February 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. . T 222/68: Scorgie to Barlow, 18 February 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. . See Monck, *Civil Service Works*; and Campbell, *The Civil Service*. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. . T 222/68: Barlow to Scorgie, 16 February 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. . Some officials believed that the end of hostilities in Europe would represent an ideal time to wind up the MOI, but Barlow rejected this proposal because it would impair the ‘nation’s will to war against Japan’. T 222/68: Report on the Ministry of Information, undated. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. . Ibid. This was not the first committee that Barlow chaired during the war. In 1942-4, he also worked on committees concerning the government’s scientific and legal staff. See Theakston, *Civil Service Since 1945*, 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. . T 222/68: Memorandum by the Postmaster-General, 6 June 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. . T 222/68: Memorandum by the Home Secretary, 2 June 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. . Churchill had earlier rebuffed Bracken’s attempt to terminate the MOI, stating ‘the question of what offices should be retained or instituted in a Government is of course one for the Prime Minister and not for the Cabinet’. T 222/68: Churchill to Bracken, 5 March 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. . T 222/68: Williams to Attlee, 29 August 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. . INF 1/942: Draft Paper on Postwar Organisation of Government Publicity, undated. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. . CAB 78/37: Memorandum by the Lord President of the Council, 14 September 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. . CAB 134/306: Official Committee on Government Information Services: Note by the Chairman, 15 December 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. . Tulloch, ‘Policing the Public Sphere’, 378. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. . See Crofts, ‘Attlee Government’s Economic Information’. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. . T 219/156: Report of the Committee on Departmental Information Officers and Information Divisions, 2 July 1947. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. . A copy of the original establishments circular can be found in T 219/156. All told, four new grades were created, starting at Assistant Information Officer and ending with Principal (later known as Chief) Information Officer. The pay of these grades corresponded to the remuneration scales used within the Executive Class of the civil service. In light of the continuing debate over the extent to which the postwar civil service was, or was not, modernised, the general absence of commentary on Information Officers is surprising. In his classic account of the development of the British civil service, Peter Hennessy, for example, mentions neither Crombie nor his committee’s reforms. See *Whitehall*. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. . T 219/156: Memorandum by the Lord President of the Council, 22 November 1947. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. . T 219/156: Letter to Bridges, 3 September 1947. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. . T 219/156: Scorgie to Ashcroft, 2 January 1948. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. . In an article in *Public Administration*, Clark drew attention to this anomaly. See ‘Do We Need Information?’. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. . Gladden, *Civil Services of UK*, 177-8; see also the Greaves, Critchley, Ogilvy-Webb and Clark volumes cited above. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. . *Hansard*, vol. 450, c. 2294, 13 May 1948. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. . Tulloch, ‘Policing the Public Sphere’, 382. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. . ‘Paid’ publicity included advertising in newspapers and magazines and on commercial radio and television. It could be distinguished from editorial publicity, which did not cost the government anything to *display* but did require the consent of the journalists and editors who oversaw the media content. Today, the first category of promotion is generally regarded as a form of ‘advertising’ whereas the second is known as ‘public relations’. Both were central to the postwar system of communications. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. . For a detailed description of the work of departmental public relations divisions, see Ogilvy-Webb, *The Government Explains*, ch. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. . Figures cited in Tulloch, ‘Policing the Public Sphere’, 366. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. . The French Committee, named after its chairman Sir Henry French, reported in November 1949 with a recommendation to reduce both the number of information staff and the use of ‘paid’ publicity. Files of the committee can be found in T 245/6. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. . Figures cited in Anthony, *Public Relations and Britain*, 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. . Not least, as Tony Shaw has remarked, because of the slow release of declassified documents. ‘The Information Research Department’, 263. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. . Main drainage, water supply, refuse disposal and street cleaning were listed as examples of ‘public health services’, with the NHS providing a specifically ‘personal’ service that would benefit all. This film, together with the other films mentioned in this paper, can be found in the archives of the British Film Institute in Hertfordshire. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. . *Hansard*,vol. 450, c. 2373, 13 May 1948. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. . Ibid, 2364-5. The MP in question was Donald Bruce, representing Portsmouth North. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. . T 222/68: Report on the Ministry of Information, undated. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. . See Cowan, ‘Democracy, Technocracy and Publicity’, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. . Miller and Dinan, *Century of Spin*, 59-62; and Crofts, *Coercion or Persuasion?*, ch. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. . Anthony Marlow used this term in a parliamentary debate in 1948. *Hansard*, v. 450, c. 2335, 13 May 1948. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. . L’Etang, ‘State Propaganda and Intelligence’, 433-6; and Anthony, *Public Relations and Britain*, 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. . Cited in Fletcher, *Powers of Persuasion,* 8. It is perhaps worth noting, in light of the aforementioned similarities between corporate and governmental justifications for propaganda, that this conference formed part of the Festival of Britain. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. . The French Committee – see note 80 above. For an account of the work of the Crown Film Unit after the war, see Pronay, ‘The Land of Promise’. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. . The COI, in turn, turned to the commercial advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, to conduct the advertising. See INF 12/1448: James Goble to John Bessant, 12 January 1983. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. . Dixon, ‘Victory by Spin?’; S. Kettell, ‘Dilemmas of Discourse’; and Hiebert, ‘Public Relations and Propaganda’. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. . According to Clark, the position of press secretary to the Prime Minister can be traced 1931, when a Chief Press Liaison Officer was appointed to no. 10. *The Central Office*, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. . *Cabinet Office*, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. . *Hansard,* v. 153, c. 191, 16 May 1989.

**Bibliography**

Books and Journal Articles

Addison, Paul. *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War*. London: Pimlico, 1994.

Anstey, Caroline. ‘The Projection of British Socialism: Foreign Office Publicity and American Opinion, 1945-50’. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19: no. 3 (1984) 417-51.

Anstey, Caroline. ‘Foreign Office Publicity, American Aid and European Unity: Mobilising Public Opinion, 1947-49’, in J. Becker and F. Knipping (eds.) *Power In Europe: Great Britain, France, Italy and Germany in a Post-war World 1945-1950*. New York: De Gruyter, 1986.

Anthony, Scott. *Public Relations and the Making of Modern Britain: Stephen Tallents and the Birth of a Progressive Media Profession*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012.

Anthony, Scott and Mansell, James (eds.) *The Projection of Britain: A History of the GPO Film Unit*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Balfour, Michael. *Propaganda in War 1939-1945: Organisations, Policies and Publics in Britain and Germany*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.

Bellman, Harold. ‘Traditions of Public Services: Can they be Extended to Businesses’, *Public Administration,* 14, no. 2 (1936), 119-133.

Browne, C. G. ‘The Public’s Part in Administration’, *Public Administration*, 17, no. 2 (1939) 131-148.

Calder, Angus. *The People’s War: Britain 1939-45*. London: Pimlico, 1969.

Campbell, G. A. *The Civil Service in Britain*. London: Gerald Duckworth, 1965.

Carruthers, Susan. ‘A Red Under Every Bed?: Anti-Communist Propaganda and Britain’s Response to Colonial Insurgency’, *Contemporary Record*, 9, no. 2 (1995) 294-318.

Chan, Nadine. ‘“Remember the Empire Filled with Your Cousins”: Poetic Exposition in the Documentaries of the Empire Marketing Board’, *Studies in Documentary Film*, 7, no. 2 (2013) 105-118.

Chapman, James. ‘The Power of Propaganda’. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35: no. 4 (2000), 679-688.

Constantine, Stephen. *Buy and Build: The Advertising Posters of the Empire Marketing Board*. London: HMSO, 1986.

Constantine, Stephen. “‘Bringing the Empire Alive”: The Empire Marketing Board and Imperial Propaganda 1926-33’, in J. Mackenzie (ed.) *Imperialism and Popular Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.

Corner, John. ‘Mediated Politics, Promotional Culture and the Idea of “Propaganda”’. *Media, Culture & Society*, 29: no. 4 (2007) 669-677.

Crofts, William. *Coercion or Persuasion? Propaganda in Britain After 1945*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Crofts, William. ‘The Attlee Government’s Economic Information Propaganda’. *Journal of Contemporary History*,21 (1986) 453-471.

Cronin, Mike. ‘Selling Irish Bacon: The Empire Marketing Board and Artists of the Free State’, *Éire-Ireland*, 39: nos. 3-4 (2004) 132-143.

Clark, Fife. ‘Do We Need Government Information Services?’, *Public Administration.* 35, no. 4 (1957) 335-346.

Clark, Fife. *The Central Office of Information*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1970.

Critchley, T. A. *The Civil Service Today*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1951.

Dixon, Paul. ‘Victory by Spin? Britain, the US and the Propaganda War Over Kosovo’, *Civil Wars*, 6, no. 4 (2003) 83-106.

Donoghue, Bernard and Jones, G. W. *Herbert Morrison. Portrait of a Politician.* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973.

Fletcher, Richard. ‘British Propaganda Since World War Two – A Case Study’, *Media, Culture & Society*, 4, no. 2 (1982) 97-109.

Fletcher, Winston. *Powers of Persuasion: The Inside Story of British Advertising: 1951-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Gladden, E. N. *Civil Services of the United Kingdom: 1885-1970*. London: Frank Cass, 1967.

Greaves, HRG. *The Civil Service in the Changing State*. London: George Harrup, 1947.

Grant, Mariel. ‘Towards a Central Office of Information: Continuity and Change in British Government Information Policy, 1939-51’. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 34: no. 1 (1999) 49-67.

Grant, Mariel. *Propaganda and the Role of the State in Interwar Britain.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Gullace, Nicoletta. ‘Allied Propaganda and World War I: Interwar Legacies, Media Studies, and the Politics of War Guilt’. *History Compass*, 9, no. 9 (2011) 568-700.

Hennessy, Peter. *Never Again: Britain, 1945-51.* London: Penguin, 2006.

Hennessy, Peter. *Whitehall.* London: Fontana, 1990.

Hiebert, R. E. ‘Public Relations and Propaganda in Framing the Iraq War: A Preliminary Review’, *Public Relations Review*, 29, no. 3 (2003) 243-255.

Highet, Alexander. ‘The Public’s Part in Administration’, *Public Administration,* 17, no. 2 (1939) 117-130.

Jefferys, Kevin. *Politics and the People: A History of British Democracy Since 1918.* London: Atlantic, 2007.

Kettell, Steven. ‘Dilemmas of Discourse: Legitimising Britain’s War on Terror’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 15, no. 2 (2013) 263-279.

John, Burton and Lamme, Margot. ‘The Evolution of an Idea: Charting the Early Public Relations Ideology of Edward L. Bernays’, *Journal of Communication Management*, 15, no. 3 (2011) 223-235.

Jones, Harriet. ‘The Impact of the Cold War’, in Paul Addison’s and Harriet Jones’ (eds.) *A Companion to Contemporary Britain 1939-2000*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.

Lasswell, Harold. *Propaganda Technique in World War I*. Cambridge: MIT, 1971.

Leslie, S. C. ‘Work of the Economic Information Unit’, *Public Administration*, 28, no. 1 (1950) 17-26.

L’Etang, Jacquie. ‘State Propaganda and Bureaucratic Intelligence: The Creation of Public Relations in 20th Century Britain’. *Public Relations Review*,24: no. 4 (1998) 413-441.

Lippmann, Walter. *Public Opinion*. Miami: BN, 2008 [1922].

McLaine, Ian. *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II.* London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979.

Miller, David and Dinan, William. *A Century of Spin: How Public Relations Became the Cutting Edge of Corporate Power.* London: Pluto, 2008.

Miller, David and Dinan, William. ‘The Rise of the PR Industry in Britain, 1979-98’. *European Journal of Communication,* 15: no. 1 (2000) 5-35.

Monck, Bosworth. *How the Civil Service Works*. London: Phoenix House, 1952.

Ogilvy-Webb, Marjorie. *The Government Explains: A Study of the Information Services*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965.

Overy, Richard. *The Twilight Years: The Paradox of Britain Between the Wars.* New York: Penguin, 2009.

Ponsonby, Arthur. *Falsehood in War-Time: Propaganda Lies of the First World War.* London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928.

Pronay, Nicholas. ‘“The Land of Promise”: The Projection of Peace Aims in Britain’, in K. R. M. Short(ed.) *Film and Radio Propaganda in World War II*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983.

Russell, Bertrand. *Free Thought and Official Propaganda.* New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1922.

Ryan, A. P. ‘Intelligence and Public Relations’, *Public Administration*, 14: no. 1 (1936) 59-65.

Seaton, Jean. ‘Reith and the Denial of Politics’, in J. Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: The Press, Broadcasting and New Media in Britain: 6th ed*, London, 2003.

Self, Robert. ‘Treasury Control and the Empire Marketing Board: The Rise and Fall of Non-Tariff Preference in Britain, 1924-1933’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 5, no. 2 (1994) 153-182.

Shaw, Tony. ‘The Information Research Department of the British Foreign Office and the Korean War, 1950–53’, *Journal of Contemporary History*. 34, no. 2 (1999) 263-282.

Simey, T. S. ‘A Public Relations Policy for Local Authorities’, *Public Administration*,13, no. 3 (1935) 242-250.

Smith, Lyn. ‘Covert British Propaganda: The Information Research Department: 1947-77’. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 9: no. 1 (1980) 67-83*.*

Spoor, Alec. ‘The Public's Part in Administration’, *Public Administration*, 17: no. 2 (1939) 149-163.

Steiner, Zara. ‘Views of War: Britain Before the “Great War” – and After’. *International Relations*. 17, no. 1 (2003) 7-33.

Stenton, Michael. ‘British Propaganda and Raison d’état 1935-40’. *European History Quarterly.* 10 (1980) 47-74.

Tallents, Stephen. *The Projection of England.* London: Faber & Faber, 1932.

Tallents, Stephen. ‘Salesmanship in the Public Service: Scope and Technique’, *Public Administration*, 11, no. 3 (1933) 259-266.

Taylor, Philip. ‘“If War Should Come”: Preparing the Fifth Arm for Total War’. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 16 (1981) 27-51.

Taylor, Philip. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day* [3rd ed.]. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003

Taithe, Bertrand & Thornton, Tim. ‘Propaganda: A Misnomer of Rhetoric and Persuasion?’, in *Propaganda: Political Rhetoric and Systems of Belief.* Surrey: Sutton, 1999.

Theakston, Kevin. *The Civil Service Since 1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Thompson, Andrew. ‘The Language of Imperialism and the Meanings of Empire: Imperial Discourse in British Politics, 1895-1914’, *Journal of British Studies*. 36: no. 2 (1997) 147-177.

Tulloch, John. ‘Policing the Public Sphere – The British Machinery of News Management’. *Media, Culture & Society*, 15: no. 3 (1993) 363-384.

Waugh, Evelyn. *Put Out More Flags*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1959.

White, Amber Blanco. *The New Propaganda*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1939.

Willcox, Temple. ‘Projection or Publicity? Rival Concepts in the Pre-war Planning of the British Ministry of Information’. *Journal of Contemporary History,* 18 (1983) 97-116.

Archival Sources

*National Archives*

CAB 78/37: *Post War Organisation of Government Publicity*, 1945

CAB 134/306: *Official Committee on Government Information Services*, 1945-46

INF 1/941: *Postwar activities of Ministry of Information*, 1943-44.

INF 1/942: *Postwar activities of Ministry of Information*, 1944-45.

INF 1/943: *Postwar activities of Ministry of Information*, 1945-46.

INF 1/944: *Postwar activities of Ministry of Information*, 1942-46

INF 12/1448: *Correspondence between COI and MOD on the use of nuclear power*, 1982-3.

T 219/156: *Crombie report on Information Officers in Government Departments*, 1947-48

T 222/68: *Future of Ministry*, 1944-45.

T 245/6: *Government publicity*, 1948-49.

Reports

*Cabinet Office: Annual Report and Accounts, 2012-13*. London, 2013.

HMSO. *An Outline of the Functions and Organisations of the Central Office of Information*. London: & Ebenezer Baylis & Son, 1968.

Unpublished Sources

Cowan, Susanne. ‘Democracy, Technocracy and Publicity: Public Consultation and British Planning, 1939-1951’, PhD diss., University of California, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)