

## **Fighting Disinformation in the 1930s: Clyde Miller and the Institute for Propaganda Analysis**

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In the late 1930s, the American journalist Clyde Miller founded the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) to promote media literacy education. Influential in its day, studying the IPA illuminates debates about the field of communications, the importance of messaging and public opinion, and the politics behind the focus on propaganda. We provide an overview of Miller's life and examine the IPA's efforts including publications, community programs, and an anti-racism curriculum, all meant to improve critical thinking skills in individuals and help democracy. We highlight the parallels between the political and media environments of the 1930s and the current proliferation of online mis/disinformation, and bring to light archival material about his dismissal from Columbia University.

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There are three ways to deal with propaganda—first, to suppress it; second to try to answer it by counterpropaganda; third, to analyze it. Suppression of propaganda is contrary to democratic principles, specifically contrary to the provisions of the U.S. Constitution. Counterpropaganda is legitimate but often intensifies cleavages. Analysis of propaganda, on the other hand, cannot hurt propaganda for a cause that we consider “good.” (Miller, 1939, para. 2)

In the late 1930s, the American journalist Clyde Miller and a group of prominent sociologists founded the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) at Columbia University Teachers College to promote media literacy education. They believed that the best response to “propaganda” was for citizens to think critically and learn to identify propaganda techniques (Gary, 1999). The intellectuals at the IPA optimistically held the view that reasoning and “scientific thought” would provide a counterweight to the growing menace of Nazi propaganda and the radio broadcasts of Father Coughlin as well as other examples of targeted “dishonest” persuasion that they identified and analyzed. Believing the best way to inoculate Americans against propaganda was through education, Miller and his colleagues published books and pamphlets for use in U.S. schools. Miller was also instrumental in developing an anti-racism curriculum used in Springfield, Massachusetts. These efforts lasted about five years before the group ran out of funding and the Columbia Teachers College (TC) fired Miller.

J. Michael Sproule is the leading scholar of the IPA. He has written extensively on the subject and met many of the group’s members (Sproule, 1997). Sproule’s book, *Propaganda and Democracy*, charts the rise and fall of the IPA and how its fortunes were affected by changes in U.S. politics as well as in the field of communications scholarship. While sympathetic to the aims of the IPA, Sproule argues that ultimately its lack of a theoretical framework and reliance on case studies meant it would never be taken seriously by communications scholars. Moreover, the group fell victim to the changing political climate. Studies of the IPA have mainly concurred with Sproule’s assessment that the Miller/IPA efforts largely failed (Bauer, 2017; Fondren, 2021)

The current preoccupation with how to counter mis/disinformation online has renewed interest in media literacy. We argue that Miller and the IPA are worth reconsidering as their experiences show both the importance of media literacy in promoting informed citizens and the limits of this approach in deeply polarized societies. Accordingly, this study brings together two strands of research: that which looks at efforts in the 1930s to combat propaganda and more recent work on using media literacy education to combat online mis/disinformation. We hope that juxtaposing these two strands will bring about a better understanding of efforts to address the threat to democracy posed by the proliferation of false (and often inflammatory) information online. We argue there are four intertwined reasons for the failure and closing of the IPA.

Previous scholarship dwelt on how Miller's ideas fell out of fashion in the communications profession (Bauer, 2017; Cmiel, 1996; Gitlin, 1978) and his related inability to raise funding to continue his work (Fondren, 2021) as the notion of "propaganda" began to be critiqued as being too broad, nebulous, and unscientific (Gary, 1999; Gitlin, 1978). Second was the political context (of which Miller was well aware) as the United States and other countries prepared for World War II with an emerging need for propaganda, thus closing the space for anti-propaganda work. Miller and the IPA became victims of the anti-communist sentiment of the 1930s and 1940s (Bauer, 2017; Schrecker, 1986; Sproule, 1997). Our archival research fleshes out two more related factors: Attacks on Miller by the red-baiting press and the poor treatment of Miller by the notorious TC dean, William Fletcher Russell (Feffer, 2019). Most of the scholars studying the IPA have relied on the archives at Columbia University and the New York Public Library. We add to this research with information from 10 other archives, including the Miller archives at Duke University, the Wisconsin Historical Society, the United Methodist Archive, the Ohio State archive, the Lilly Library of Indiana University Bloomington, the Cleveland Public Library, the Western Kentucky Library, and the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, which contain previously unseen correspondence and research, providing a more complete picture of Clyde Miller's life before the IPA as well as his continued political activism after losing his job at Columbia.

While Miller and the IPA were unable to complete their mission, media literacy experts such as Rene Hobbs, co-founder of the National Association for Media Literacy Education, credit the IPA with influencing much of current practice (Hobbs & Rushkoff, 2020). The IPA's legacy includes both the descriptive language and the techniques used to identify propaganda as well as the emphasis on teaching critical thinking in schools (Hobbs & McGee, 2014). After the 2016 elections, worries about mis/disinformation entered the mainstream. By 2020, 14 U.S. states had media literacy laws on the books (Media Literacy Now, 2021). The United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, Australia, Sweden, and other countries teach media literacy in schools while Finland continues to be a leading example (Henley, 2020). Attacks on anti-racist education have also returned, mostly emanating from the conservative faction of the Republican party.

There is far more research available today on how new information changes the behavior of governments and individuals. Advances in quantitative measurement have enabled researchers to show that propaganda, such as that disseminated on Fox News, has a statistically significant effect although controversy remains regarding the magnitude of the social effects and the effectiveness of the antidotes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Ash, Galleta, Pinna, & Warshaw, 2021). The power of algorithms, microtargeting, the speed at which information circulates, and the volume of information online have all contributed to fears that people are overwhelmed by mis/disinformation. Current worries about the effects of new technologies are similar to the preoccupation with propaganda in the period after World War I.

### **Propaganda as the Preoccupation of the 1930s**

Like many others, Miller believed that the propaganda of the World War I era was more powerful than any that had preceded it (Cmiel, 1996; Gary, 1999). Propaganda was viewed as instrumental in creating public support for the war, leading governments and the military to develop and refine their communications skills and public relations strategies. The writer George Creel served as the head of the

Committee on Public Information set up by President Wilson. Journalists and academics produced vast amounts of posters, films, press releases, songs, slogans, political cartoons, and traveling exhibits to persuade the public of the importance of the war effort (Greenberg, 2016, p. 110). Miller himself spent a year in France during the war supporting the U.S. military (*Ohio State Lantern, 1918*).

Intellectuals of the time thought deeply about how and when propaganda worked—including when it worked contrary to broader societal objectives, by undermining democracy and free thought. Walter Lippmann, in his 1922 book, *Public Opinion*, drew on his wartime experiences to analyze how opinions formed (Greenberg, 2016, p. 109). Lippmann (1922) famously coined the term “manufacture of consent” (p. 158) to describe this process. Thousands of books and articles about propaganda were written including those by Edward Bernays, widely credited with founding the field of modern public relations, and Harold Lasswell, author of the influential *Propaganda Techniques in the World War* (Gary, 1999).

The political catastrophes of the 1930s gave these studies new urgency (Cmiel, 1996). Faced with the rise of fascist regimes and the proliferation of their propaganda, scholars and journalists struggled to understand how people could fall prey to lies and overblown rhetoric (John & Tworek, 2021). The German government used propaganda as part of its attempts to support appeasement and forestall war. In the United States, German propagandists (Tworek, 2019) even wrote (Hart, 2018, p. 104) speeches for U.S. senator Ernest Lundeen of Minnesota, foreshadowing the way Russian disinformation is circulated today by far-right politicians in the United States and Europe (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Jamieson, 2018; Pomerantsev, 2015). The IPA began by analyzing susceptibility to propaganda. Agreeing with the prevailing view that Germany’s defeat in World War I and the consequent dire economic conditions paved the way for the rise of Adolf Hitler, the IPA focused on solutions.

In the 1930s, the definition of “propaganda” was extraordinarily broad, as seen in the IPA’s definition “that propaganda is expression of opinions or action by individuals or groups designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with predetermined ends” (Cantril, 1938, p. 217). The IPA was criticized for equating propaganda with persuasion, as even before World War I there was disagreement about propaganda’s effectiveness (John & Tworek, 2021). A contemporary piece in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* accused the IPA of “excess interpretation” (DeVoto, 1938, p. 110) while in 1946 Max Lerner called the IPA “amateur detectives.” This disagreement over whether those worried about the effects of propaganda were alarmists anticipates the scholarly debates after 2016 about what role, if any, online mis/disinformation played in the Trump and Brexit elections (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Of course, measuring media effects is well known to be notoriously difficult so there is continued disagreement about the role of Facebook versus Fox, for example, in the 2016 elections (Jamieson, 2018).

These disagreements help make the idea of media literacy more attractive. It is a common-sense approach, and it is hard to argue with the views of proponents of media literacy that rational citizens should look closely at sources of information to avoid being hoodwinked. Sproule characterized the IPA as having a “progressive reformist mission of propaganda analysis to help an essentially competent public against the new co-option of communication channels by powerful institutions” (Sproule, 1989, p. 225). This optimistic view of human nature fit with John Dewey’s influential ideas of rational and participatory citizens (Sproule, 1989). Miller’s vantage point was that public education was

the solution to the problem of propaganda. He is often quoted as saying the “American way” to combat propaganda was to understand and explain it, not emulate or suppress it, and this was the stance taken by the IPA. In citing the “American Way,” Miller was part of a project that used the term to promote national unity and shared values. Contestation over what this actually meant has been well described by Wendy Walls (2008) in her book *Inventing the American Way*.

Miller and the IPA believed that critical thinking should be taught in schools (Edwards, 1938, p. 8). But they also believed (like many today) that addressing the problem of propaganda or mis/disinformation must also involve strengthening journalistic values of verification, media literacy education, and belief in science.

Further, they recognized the problem of media capture by business tycoons with political agendas. The IPA’s response to the problem of capture was not just that audiences should think critically, but also that journalists themselves needed to embody the values of “professionalism,” which by the 1930s had been instilled in much, but not all, of the U.S. press (Schudson, 2001). These ideas of the role of the journalist and responsibility to audiences came back after the 2016 elections, when many journalists redoubled their efforts to build trust among audiences (Wenzel, 2017).

### **Clyde Miller’s Life**

Clyde Miller was born on July 7, 1888—in Columbus, Ohio—and received his bachelor of arts from Ohio State in 1911 (Kelley, 2018). He started working as a reporter for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* in 1916 and went on to become director of publicity for the army educational commission of the YMCA (*Ohio State Lantern*, 1918). On his return from France, he joined a publicity firm in Cleveland called Henderson & Jappe (*Columbia Spectator*, 1935; *Ohio State Lantern*, 1918). He changed jobs again, and by 1924 was superintendent of publications for Cleveland public schools and co-founded the Journalism Association of Ohio high schools (JAOS; *Ohio State Lantern*, 1925). He edited an article for teachers called “School topics” and started a journalism group for students (Illinois Education Association, 1921).

By Miller’s own account, the subject of propaganda was personal. He felt propaganda had tricked him into blindly supporting World War I—as it had many others—and claimed that his zeal made him responsible for the prosecution of socialist activist and presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs under the Sedition Act. The story is recounted in several biographies of Debs as well as in an article written by Miller for *The Progressive* (Miller, 1963). Miller had originally opposed the War, then tried to enlist and been rejected because of his eyesight. After joining the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* in 1916 he was assigned to the “Federal Beat” with the U.S. district attorney Edwin Wertz and accompanied federal agents on their raids (Ewalt, 1926). In June 1918, Miller was sent to interview Debs and then covered a speech in which Debs spoke out against the War. The famous speech in Canton, Ohio, on June 16, 1918, at the Ohio convention of the socialist party was attended by more than 1,200 people including a government stenographer (Ginger, 2007, p. 265). Miller took notes in shorthand, filed a story, and called Wertz to say that Debs had violated the Espionage Act. Word came back from Washington that they did not want to prosecute Debs, but Miller and his paper kept up the pressure until Wertz decided to go ahead (Ginger, 2007, p. 371). Miller was a

lead witness for the prosecution and Debs was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Before he went to jail, he saw Miller and said:

You are going to France and you may never come back. I'm going to Atlanta and I don't know whether I'll live out my sentence. But what do you say we make a deal? If you get back from France and I get out of jail and we meet, what do you say we get together and tell each other who was more nearly right or wrong about this war? (Miller, 1963, para. 2)

According to Miller's (1963) recounting, this conversation was transformative. During his time in France, Miller turned against the War but he does not explain why. In his article he wrote only:

In six months in France, I learned more about how wars are made than in all my years in college. I learned how propaganda worked. I decided Debs was right and I was wrong. I came back to America feeling I had done Debs a great injustice and should try to get him out of prison. (Miller, 1963, p. 33)

Miller says he tried to get Secretary of War Newton Baker to help Debs and was rebuffed, and then in the spring of 1920 approached Senator Warren Harding who was more enthusiastic (Freeberg, 2010). Amnesty for Debs had become a cause célèbre by this time, with Mae West and Helen Keller among those who urged his release, appealing to Harding, who eventually granted Debs an amnesty in time for Christmas 1921 (Freeberg, 2010).

Miller began teaching summer sessions at TC in 1929 (topics included educational sociology and administration of school systems), and in 1935 was appointed associate professor of education at an annual salary of \$6,700 and soon became head of communications.

### **Founding of the IPA**

On March 29, 1937, Miller met department store owner and philanthropist Edward Filene at the University Club in Boston. Also at the meeting were public relations pioneer Edward Bernays and Harvard faculty member Kirtley F. Mather (Greenberg, 2016). The topic discussed was "education for democracy" and Filene spoke about his worries that Americans were becoming susceptible to propaganda, unable to evaluate information thoughtfully and make sound assessments (Sproule, 1997, p. 130). Filene asked for ideas about how to combat the problem. While some attendees described the meeting as long and boring—Bernays even claimed that Filene would "nod off in little snatches of sleep"—Miller (1939) took the request seriously (Allen & Pottle, 2018, p. 8). Collaborating with James Mendenhall from the experimental Lincoln School,<sup>2</sup> Miller drafted a proposal for an institute to study propaganda (Sproule, 1997). The group met again later that year in New York, where Filene offered Miller a \$10,000 grant on the spot. By the fall, the two had agreed that Filene would provide Miller's educational project at TC, Columbia University, with funding for three years, and together they named it the "Institute for Propaganda Analysis" (Nicoitra, 2009). Filene was

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<sup>2</sup> Part of a well-known group of progressive private schools in New York City, which later merged with Horace Mann and was replaced by New Lincoln School. This later merged with Walden School on West 88th Street. Lincoln School was founded in 1917 and affiliated with Columbia TC (Hefron, 1999).

a liberal philanthropist who had earlier invited the muckraker Lincoln Steffens to Boston to help reform local politics. The so-called Boston 1915 project failed, but Filene continued funding programs that helped support liberal democratic ideals. Later, the IPA received funding from Filene's Goodwill Fund, the American Jewish Committee, the Whitney Foundation, subscription revenue, and several significant contributions from anonymous individuals (Fondren, 2021).

The initial IPA board included sociologist Robert Lynd, historian Charles Beard, and Princeton University psychologist Hadley Cantril, who had researched the audience response to the 1938 radio broadcast of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (Greenberg, 2016; Sproule, 1997). Also involved in the IPA were sociologists Alfred McClung Lee and journalist and media critic I. F. Stone, who worked as a researcher (Sproule, personal communication, June 28, 2020),<sup>3</sup> Violet Edwards,<sup>4</sup> and Clyde Beals, who was later stigmatized during the McCarthy era because of his involvement in the Newspaper Guild (Glende, 2012).

### IPA's Activities

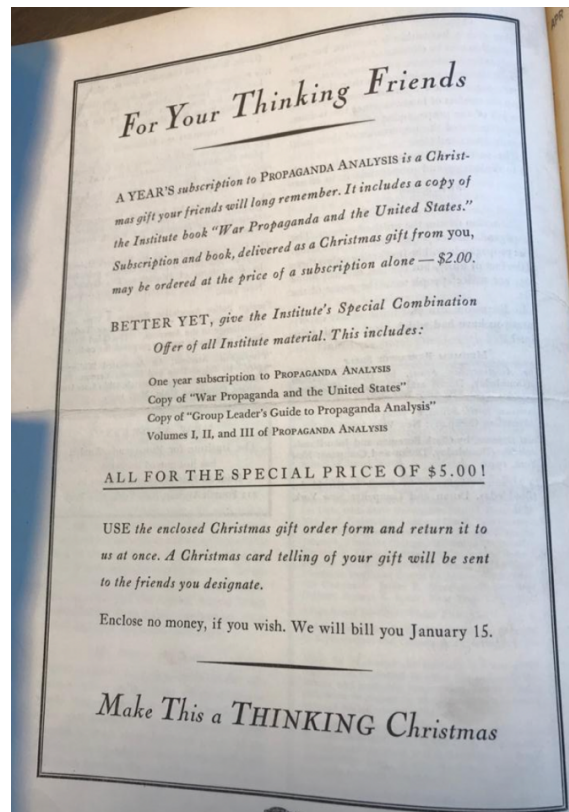
Initially the IPA was known as a leader in the field of propaganda analysis. Their efforts were received favorably and covered by newspapers including *The New York Times* (1937), and IPA members made appearances on TV networks like CBS (*The Wall Street Journal*, 1941; Sproule, 1997, p. 133). Over the next five years, Miller and his colleagues at the IPA published at least five books, teaching materials and a monthly newsletter called *Propaganda Analysis*, an advertisement that can be seen in Figure 1, which had 4,000 subscribers by 1938 (Lee & Lee, 1979).

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<sup>3</sup> According to Izzy Stone's biographer, Don Guttenplan, Stone began work in May 1939 and, after having traveled to California to do interviews, wrote the IPA Bulletin issue on the Associated Farmers, which had been founded to stop farm workers from joining unions (Guttenplan, 2009). Guttenplan (2009) describes how Stone attacked the Associated Farmers for false populism, saying it was essentially a "front for West Coast banks, utility companies, railroads and big growers intended to stop cannery workers and migrant pickers from joining unions" (p. 143).

<sup>4</sup> Violet Edwards wrote some of the IPA materials but is not usually mentioned in accounts of the IPA's work. We hope to rectify this lacuna in the future once we have done more research. J. Michael Sproule had dinner with Violet Edwards and her husband in December 1982 and wrote to the author that:

Violet idolized Miller and cherished her work with the Institute. [Her husband] Hal [on] the other hand seemed to have been chiefly happy for escaping the red baiting which surrounded the IPA. He was co-author of the Institute's second book, *WAR PROPAGANDA AND THE UNITED STATES*, with James Wechsler, his friend who was somewhat less successful in remaining under the radar. (Sproule, personal communication, June 28, 2020)



**Figure 1. Advertisement for propaganda analysis.**

### **The Group Leader's Guide to Propaganda Analysis: An Analysis of the Source of the Problem**

In 1938, the IPA published a foundational document advancing its view that both personal proclivity and social forces induced susceptibility to propaganda. The 240-page report distilled much of the then-current thinking on the topic and anticipated much of today's discussions, particularly the idea that emotional audiences need to be thoughtful and analytical when confronted with propaganda. In the 1938 *Group Leader's Guide to Propaganda Analysis*, IPA's educational director, Violet Edwards, argued that the "common man" was "tragically confused" by overwhelming amounts of information and having to make decisions without first-hand information. Instead of being able to rely on the town hall or cracker barrel of yore, where citizens could discuss the topics that affected them personally, citizens now had to rely on information from others about how society should be organized and which policies should be pursued (Edwards, 1938). It was a point that had been made by others including Walter Lippmann, who argued that the common man should rely on journalism to help sift through and distill the excessive information available (Lippmann, 1925). The IPA urged journalists to go into communities to explain the importance of journalism. Moreover, Edwards argued that to understand the second-hand information on which citizens depend, readers must adopt critical thinking and scientific methods. Audiences need to understand the sources of information,



persuasion techniques, and the biases and emotions that they bring to each subject. Just as disinformation researchers do today, the IPA discussed confirmation bias and the role of advertising.

Bringing “the newspaper man’s passion for simplifying complicated subjects,” the IPA devised what might now be called “listicles,” which were short taxonomies that could be used to develop critical thinking skills about propaganda (*Bulletin*, 1937b, para. 4). The “Seven common propaganda devices,” printed below in Figure 2, and published in the *Bulletin* in 1937, created a taxonomy of the different techniques used to spread propaganda (*Bulletin*, 1937b).

- Seven Propaganda Devices Described by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis**

  - Name-Calling. Based on “hate and fear,” the propagandist gives “bad names” “to those individuals, groups, nations, races, policies, practices, beliefs and ideals which he would have us condemn and reject.”
  - Glittering generalities. Words are used to “stir up our emotions and befog our thinking . . . The propagandist identifies his program with virtue by use of ‘virtue words’. Glittering Generalities is a device to make us *accept and approve*, without examining the evidence.”
  - Transfer: “The propagandist carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something we respect and revere to something he would have us accept.”
  - Testimonial: For instance, “When I feel tired, I smoke a Camel and get the grandest lift.”
  - Plain Folks: They “win our confidence by appearing to be people like ourselves.” For example, a commercial says, “It’s our family’s whiskey, neighbor; and neighbor, it’s your price.”
  - Card Stacking: “The propagandist deploys all the arts of deception to win our support for himself [ . . . ] by means of this device propagandists would convince us that a ruthless war of aggression is a crusade for righteousness.” “He stacks the cards against the truth. He uses under-emphasis and over-emphasis to dodge issues and evade facts. He resorts to lies, censorship and distortion. He omits facts. He offers false testimony.”
  - Bandwagon: “A device to make us follow the crowd to accept the propagandists’ program *en masse*.” . . . “Propagandists will appeal to us as Catholics, Protestants, or Jews” and use biases common to a group. “The theme of this type of propaganda may be summed up in the statement, ‘Everybody’s doing it: come along and follow the great majority, for it can’t be wrong.’”

**Figure 2. The seven common propaganda devices.**

The IPA argued that propaganda was intended to appeal to emotions instead of to reason and to sway audiences against groups or nations (*Bulletin*, 1937a). The IPA’s “ABCs of propaganda analysis,” shown in Figure 3, helped prompt audiences so they could become active readers who were capable of carefully questioning and analyzing their own reactions to propaganda, retaining skepticism, and then seeking out the facts (*Bulletin*, 1937a).

### **Some ABCs of Propaganda Analysis (December, 1937)**

**ASCERTAIN** the conflict element in the propaganda you are analyzing. All propaganda contains a conflict element in some form or other—either as cause, or as effect, or as both cause and effect.

**BEHOLD** your own reaction to this conflict element. It is always necessary to know and to take into consideration our own opinions with regard to a conflict situation about which we feel strongly, on which we are prone to take sides. This information permits us to become more objective in our analysis.

**CONCERN** yourself with today's propagandas associated with today's conflicts. These are the ones that affect directly our income, business, working conditions, health, education, and religious, political, and social responsibilities.

**DOUBT** that your opinions are 'your very own.' They usually aren't. Our opinions, even with respect to today's propagandas, have been largely determined for us by inheritance and environment . . . We tend to distrust the opinions of those who differ from us in inheritance and environment. Only drastic changes in our life conditions can offset or cancel out the effect of inheritance and long years of environment.

**EVALUATE**, therefore, with the greatest care, your own propagandas [beliefs]. We must learn clearly why we act and believe as we do with respect to various conflicts and issues—political, economic, social, and religious . . . This is very important.

**FIND THE FACTS** before you come to any conclusion. There is usually plenty of time to form a conclusion and believe in it later on. Once we learn how to recognize propaganda, we can most effectively deal with it by suspending our judgment until we have time to learn the facts and the logic or trickery involved in the propaganda in question. We must ask:

- Who is this propagandist?
- How is he trying to influence our thoughts and actions?
- For what purpose does he use the common propaganda devices?
- Do we like his purposes?
- How does he use words and symbols?
- What are the exact meanings of his words and symbols?
- What does the propagandist try to make these words and symbols appear to mean?
- What are the basic interests of this propagandist?
- Do his interests coincide with the interests of most citizens, of our society as we see it?

**GUARD** always, finally, against omnibus words. They are the words that make us the easy dupes of propagandists. Omnibus or carryall words are words that are extraordinarily difficult to define. They carry all sorts of meanings to the various sorts of men. Therefore, the best test for the truth or falsity of propaganda lies in specific and concrete definitions of the words and symbols used by the propagandist. Moreover, sharp definition is the best antidote against words and symbols that carry a high charge of emotion.

**Figure 3. ABCs of propaganda analysis.**

### **IPA Solutions**

*Critical Thinking: Understanding the Seven Devices and Applying the ABCs*

Armed with these taxonomies, the IPA applied them. The IPA analyzed political speeches by using tiny icons after each phrase to explain which technique was used. Published in 1939, the institute's most popular book, Alfred McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee's *The Fine Art of Propaganda: A Study of Father*

*Coughlin's Speeches*, analyzed the anti-Semitic radio broadcasts of the infamous Father Coughlin throughout the 1930s, a Catholic priest in Detroit who was estimated to have 30 million listeners for his conspiracy-laden broadcasts (Brinkley, 1996; Lee, 1939; Silver, 1934; Warren, 1996). The book was a brief "sensation" and sold some 30,000 copies (Sproule, 1997, p. 146).

The IPA's monthly *Propaganda Analysis* covered contemporary events, analyzing the propaganda techniques used and recommending further reading and classroom discussion questions. Each issue contained teaching guides and was sent to U.S. high schools, as seen in Figure 4. The IPA formed a relationship with *Scholastic* magazine, and produced a series between 1939 and 1940 called "What Makes You Think So? Expert Guidance to Help You Think Clearly and Detect Propaganda in Any Form" (Nicotra, 2009, p. 335). According to the IPA, by the late 1930s, one million school children were using its methods. The IPA corresponded with some 2,500 teachers (Sproule, 1997) and sold more than 18,000 copies of the *Bulletin* (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1942).

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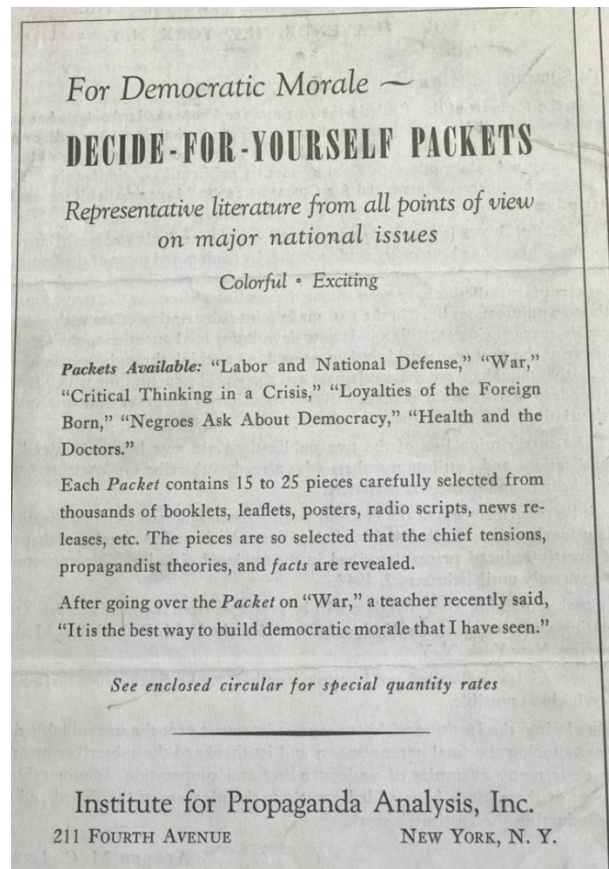
**Figure 4. Propaganda analysis for classrooms.**

The analyses displayed a broad understanding of the context in which the media operated and how propaganda worked. The *Bulletin* provided qualitative content analyses and dissected the tactics of the growing public relations industry, anti-union press coverage, the quality of evidence presented to the Dies Committee (later known as the House Un-American Activities Committee), as well as tactics used by White

supremacists, domestic fascists, and Nazi sympathizers. The IPA also provided accurate information as a counterweight along with long lists of recommended readings. Each issue was 12 pages long and crammed with text, and an example is shown in Figure 5.

From the beginning, the *Bulletin* was contentious. In the first issue, dated October 1937, Miller compared the use of propaganda in the Pullman strike of 1894 with that used by Henry Ford and the Johnstown citizens in the infamous and violent May 1937 "Little Steel Strikes," which resulted from Republic Steel and Inland Steel refusing to recognize the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The steel companies had taken out advertisements in support of their position and encouraged citizens' groups to come out against the workers (Blumenthal, 1939). But, unsurprisingly, in an affidavit to the Dies Committee, the steel company's public relations firm Hill & Knowlton disputed the claims made by the IPA about the company's role in the famously violent Youngstown Steel Strike, which had been part of the Little Steel Strike (Turrini, 1997, p. 254).

The May 1938 issue described how "testimonials" and "glittering generalities" were used in Nazi propaganda. The 16-page issue discussed the neglect of the German middle class after World War I, and high unemployment rates, arguing that this made them more susceptible to Nazi propaganda. The *Bulletin* also discussed German industrialist Thyssen, who wanted to crush labor as well as communism, and funded the German Nazi party (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1938, p. 3). Applying the seven propaganda devices, the IPA analyzed the use of Nazi symbols like swastikas and the othering of Jewish people and dissected how these tropes surfaced in the publications of domestic U.S. Nazi groups such as the American Nationalist Confederation, which the IPA compared with the 19th-century White supremacist organization White Camelia.



**Figure 5. IPA's analysis packets.**

### The Marketplace of Ideas

The *Bulletin* wrote about how authoritarian regimes lacked the "competing organizations" that create a marketplace of ideas. Two issues were devoted to "newspaper analysis," arguing that in democracies there are "many voices, many opinions and many propagandas" (*Bulletin*, 1937b, para. 2). The IPA maintained that the problem was not only propaganda; but also the state's domination of information flows and capture of the media through ownership and advertising (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1938). Quoting University of Missouri journalism professor Roscoe Ellard, the *Bulletin* made the point that editors of small-town newspapers cannot afford to lose advertising revenue and so can gradually succumb to pressure from the business community as well as from readers. The result can be a softening of the newspaper's stance and self-censorship (*Bulletin*, 1938). Large newspapers able to resist are the most "reliable," and the *Bulletin* provided a list of credible newspapers, which included *The New York Times* and *The Baltimore Sun*. Based on a survey of working journalists in Washington D.C., the list of newspapers found to be unreliable included the *Chicago Tribune*, which at that time was owned by William Randolph

Hearst, and the communist party's *Daily Worker*. This idea of rating outlets' veracity returned after 2016 with groups like Newsguard and Reporters Without Borders' Journalism Trust Initiative.

### **Battles That Broke the IPA**

#### ***Red-Baiting and the IPA***

Miller's work led to attacks by the red-baiting press. He was deeply involved in the Methodist Federation for Social Action, Harry F. Ward's group, which believed in the social gospel, actively supported labor rights, and critiqued capitalism. In 1936 the Hearst papers attacked the Methodist Federation for Social Action for being under communist influence. Hearst was known for attacking "Reds" in universities and schools and even sending in reporters disguised as students to try to uncover left-wing professors in the classroom (Alwood, 2007; Feffer, 2019). According to Miller, Hearst told TC that Miller should "lay off" Hearst, and Miller alleged that in 1948 a senior administrator at TC offered Miller money to shut down the IPA (Miller, 1948, 1952).

*The World-Telegram*, which moved steadily to the right after being acquired by Scripps Howard in 1931, also attacked the federation (Miller, 1952). The red-baiting columnist Frederik Woltman attended the federation's annual meeting and wrote a column "accusing the federation of being sympathetic toward the policies of the Soviet Union" (*The New York Times*, 1948, para. 3). Miller protested as soon as the piece appeared, writing to Dean Ackerman of the Columbia Journalism School to urge him to rescind the Pulitzer Prize awarded to Woltman in 1947 (Miller, 1952). Columnist Westbrook Pegler also joined in the attacks.

The IPA was investigated by the Dies Committee, which had been set up to analyze both communist and fascist activities in the United States. It later became notorious as the House Committee on Un-American Activities, used by Joseph McCarthy after World War II. In January 1940, the IPA devoted an issue of the *Bulletin* to the Dies Committee. The committee was often criticized for not going after the domestic far right and for focusing too much on communism (Heale, 1986). Miller argued that many of the witnesses who appeared before the committee presented scant evidence and abundant gossip. He noted that committee chairman Martin Dies and his supporters took the view that "some of his witnesses might be unreliable but insisted, nevertheless, that valuable evidence of Communist activities was being uncovered where none had been suspected" (*Bulletin*, 1940, para. 3).

After this issue of the *Bulletin* was published in January 1940, IPA president Professor Kirtley F. Mather of Harvard signed a letter to Congress calling for the cessation of the committee's activities (*The New York Times*, 1941). This was not the first such letter (Heineman, 1992). Following the publication of the *Bulletin*, Dies' deputy, J. B. Matthews, announced that an investigation into the IPA had been underway for two years, saying that committee members wanted to understand who was influencing American students (*The New York Times*, 1941).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Historian A. J. Bauer cites a May 1939 letter from Clyde Miller to Martin Dies in which Miller offers to share information on the IPA's research on fascist groups based in the United States.

### **Anti-Racist Education**

Besides the criticism they faced from the Dies Committee and the red-baiting by some of the press, Miller and other academics were criticized for their work designing a curriculum aimed at promoting civic engagement and racial and religious tolerance. Piloted in Springfield, Massachusetts school district, which had a sympathetic superintendent, the Springfield project was launched in 1939 and began to unravel in 1945, shutting down in 1947 (Johnson, 2006). It was part of a movement of the 1930s that believed education would address what sociologist E. George Payne (1946) described as propaganda that was exacerbating the "growing menace of racial, religious, political and other prejudices in our country."<sup>6</sup> Similar programs were adopted in other cities including Detroit, New York, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, and San Diego (Johnson, 2006).

The Springfield plan generated "sensational interest" (Payne, 1946). It was featured in a *March of Time* newsreel, "Americans All," and was the subject of a Warner Bros film *It Happened in Springfield*, released in 1945 (Johnson, 2006). Johnson notes that the Springfield Plan "became the most well-publicized intercultural educational curriculum in the 1940s, talked about and emulated by school districts across the country and into Canada" (Johnson, 2006, p. 301). Even so, she notes that the Springfield Plan and other intercultural education programs fell victim to the "red-baiting investigations" of the 1950s (Bresnahan, 1971, p. 43; Johnson, 2006). Miller was attacked for being anti-Catholic and criticized in the Catholic newspaper, *Brooklyn Tablet*, for lectures he had given about intercultural education (Miller, c. 1930s). The incident was featured in a 1948 pamphlet on threats to academic freedom published by the New York Teachers Union (Lewis, Shlakman, & Jaffe, 1948). The Methodist Federation was also a victim. By the 1950s, ecumenical Protestants were "on the defensive" because of the positions their leaders had "taken on race, empire, economic inequality and nationalism" (Hollinger, 2013, p. 71).

### **IPA Winds Down and Miller Loses his Job**

Running low on funding, the IPA stopped publishing the *Bulletin* in 1942, and disbanded after the United States entered World War II. In its farewell issue of January 9, 1942, headlined "We say au revoir," the IPA explained that the board of directors had voted to suspend operations (*Bulletin*, 1942, para. 1). The editors expressed satisfaction with their work, warned that wartime is usually accompanied by a rise in intolerance, and expressed the hope that the IPA's techniques for analyzing propaganda would be used in the future.

Purges of progressives and general skepticism about propaganda more broadly affected Columbia University too. TC had been riven by political battles during the 1930s (Wechsler, 1938), as had Columbia

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<sup>6</sup> A flavor of the time can be found in Clarence I. Chatto's "Education for Democratic Living," in which he describes ninth graders interviewing a foreign-born resident of the city and writing their biographies and other groups of students making books about folk music (Chatto, 1944). "Children learn to be good citizens of tomorrow by learning to be good citizens of the school today. They learn to accept other Americans as comrades and equals by doing just that on the school playground and in the classroom" (Chatto, 1944, p. 189).

University, with President Nicolas Butler known as a staunch supporter of Mussolini (Norwood, 2007). In 1927 President William Fletcher Russell took over from his father and became dean of TC, an act of nepotism still remembered on campus (Cremin, Shannon, & Townsend, 1954, p. 130). Fletcher Russell was known for his determination to purge TC of "reds" and for being "capricious" and firing anyone with whom he disagreed. Deweyites with progressive views and those involved in anti-racism curriculums were all let go, as was Miller (Feffer, 2019, p. 138; McCaughey, personal communication, July 21, 2021). When the official history of TC was published in 1954, it alluded to financial troubles and layoffs, but Miller and the IPA were not even mentioned (Cremin et al., 1954).

Miller was placed on leave in 1943, but never brought back to work (Miller, c. 1944). In 1948, he was officially terminated and told it was because of departmental restructuring. Many professors were let go for political reasons even before the McCarthy era (Schrecker, 1986) and Miller was one of them. He lost Columbia housing and salary and wrote repeatedly to Columbia University's president, protesting his treatment and asking for his apartment back. Letters in the Central Archives at Columbia University suggest that Dean Russell had long disliked Miller's work and had begun suggesting in 1939 that Miller seek employment elsewhere. After his dismissal, Miller spoke to *The New York Times*, saying it was a violation of academic freedom, hired a lawyer to petition Columbia University for \$100,000 in damages, and asked the American Association of University Professors to write to the provost (Miller, 1948; *New York Herald Tribune*, 1948; *The New York Times*, 1948).

Responding to questions about the circumstances of Miller's firing, Russell, on June 29, 1948, sent a 13-page letter to provost Albert G. Jacobs outlining the case for Miller's termination. The letter seemed to satisfy the administration, which thanked Russell for his "thorough account" (Anonymous, 1948). Some of the letters from the period after Miller's departure are missing from the archive, but what remains gives an inkling of some of Russell's preoccupations and ambitions. On December 7, 1948, Russell wrote another memo to the provost, this time asking that Russell's job title be changed from "Dean" of TC to "President" of TC. In March 1949, Russell submitted another lengthy memo, proposing "A Substantial Program by Columbia University and Teachers College for Education for Americanism" aimed at strengthening "loyalty to American ideals and action" (Russell, 1949, para. 1). Saying that Americans have "weak defenses," Russell outlined the threat from communists and added that schools needed to inculcate an appreciation for liberty so that citizens could resist:

Soviet agents, for thirty years, have conducted a skillful campaign to capture posts of leadership in government service, labor unions, agencies of communications and in colleges and schools . . . the Communist Professors at the University of Washington—and I fear there are others—those Americans who follow blindly the Soviets; those who let themselves be drawn into the organization of the hammer and sickle; maybe editors of great ability, labor leaders of power, government servants whose superiors may commend them highly, professors who know and contribute to their subject; but they do not know enough about liberty, and its diseases and dangers, to keep them from being agents of a foreign power or from giving unconscious aid and comfort to the enemy in a cold war. (Russell, 1949).

Subsequent correspondence suggests the proposal was adopted, becoming less explicitly anti-communist, and was funded by the Carnegie Corporation. In 1971, Miller moved to Lismore, New South



Wales, Australia with his son and son's family and developed dementia (Packard, personal communication, June 1, 2022). Clyde Miller was put in a home, died in 1977, and was buried in Australia.

### **Related to the Field: Broader Context of Propaganda**

From today's perspective, one might criticize the IPA for its excessive optimism and belief that education and reason would suffice against propaganda. But there remains a large body of literature and strong media literacy movements supporting the IPA's approach (Head, Fister, & MacMillan, 2020; Hobbs, 2020; Hobbs & McGee, 2014). Its seeming failure has more to do with the changing political context.

As the United States moved into World War II, the scholarship shifted, particularly with the invention of modern communications studies (Cmiel, 1996). Miller and the IPA fell out of fashion. They began to seem like a popular-front relic, folksy lefties with the same breathless, wide-eyed approach of the daily newspaper *PM* (Schiffirin, 1984). They were overshadowed by changes in the communications field (and at Columbia), which focused on media effects and polling, using focus groups and longitudinal panel studies (John & Tworek, 2021, p. 46). As Todd Gitlin and others describe, communications scholars stopped using the term "propaganda," instead using terms like "communication" and "communications research" (Cmiel, 1996, p. 90). Miller and the IPA were eclipsed by Paul Lazarsfeld, who founded Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research with grants from the Rockefeller Foundation. But while the Deweyites at TC came under attack by Fletcher Russell and communications scholarship left Miller behind, a robust strand of media literacy research and practice continued to analyze the sources, nature, and quandary of what to do about propaganda.

### **IPA and Media Literacy Programs Today**

The idea that new forms of media are overwhelming audiences, who are unable to distinguish truth from falsehoods, came back with a vengeance after the Trump and Brexit votes of 2016 and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 (Atkins, 2017). After 2016, scholars focused on understanding the techniques and dynamics underlying the problem of online information. This inevitably involved creating taxonomies, echoing the IPA's earlier work. Claire Wardle (2017), executive director of First Draft, released her rubric "Fake news, it's complicated," which is a standard text in the field. Wardle describes the types of mis/disinformation as satire and parody, misleading content, imposter content and fabricated content, false connection, false context, and manipulated content. Her article with Hossein Derakhshan (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) includes a rubric of who the different actors and targets are: states targeting states, states targeting private actors, corporates targeting consumers. Also widely cited is the typology from Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2017), who reviewed 34 scholarly articles published between 2003 and 2017 and formulated a typology that included satire, parody, false images, advertising and public relations, which sometimes overlaps with propaganda. The IPA's seven propaganda devices are still used and were reprinted in the 2020 edition of *Mind Over Media*, the classic media literacy text by Renee Hobbs.

### The Ongoing Debate on the Effectiveness of Media Training

Former journalists are still at the forefront of contemporary media literacy efforts,<sup>7</sup> working with teachers to train students to think critically about information.<sup>8</sup> Many of the IPA techniques and arguments about their efficacy continue, in different forms, in discussions regarding online mis/disinformation. If one accepts that disinformation or propaganda does indeed change minds, but one is also committed to the First Amendment, the options for those who want to counteract propaganda/disinformation are greatly circumscribed. As Miller said: The optimal outcome is not to counteract or to suppress but to educate. That is still a core tenet of the media literacy community. The concept of “immunizing people” (Johnson, 2006) against false information is still used in the field of media literacy training. The IPA’s attempts to promote scientific method and rational discourse as a way of countering disinformation is reflected in the 2019 work of cognitive psychologist Gordon Pennycook and cognitive brain scientist David Rand. Pennycook and Rand (2019) argue that activating common sense in audiences can lead to more accurate discernment when these audiences are confronted with online misinformation. They found that “accuracy prompts” reduce forwarding of false headlines (Pennycook & Rand, 2022). Miller might have been disappointed by the idea that nudges and priming are needed as he and Edwards had great faith in the notion that education and raising awareness would lead to a more rational consumption of information. On the other hand, the view that it is possible to prompt people into behaving in a more rational way is certainly consistent with the IPA’s core belief that education can help make audiences less susceptible to propaganda.

Uncertainty about the impact of media literacy training continues, and contemporary discussion often resembles that found in the pages of *Propaganda Analysis*. Social psychologists and others have noted that countering false information is difficult when those who spread false information refuse to change their ideas or, when told something is not true, simply double down on their prejudices (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Just as Trump supporters maintain that factual errors are unimportant because Trump is speaking a larger truth, the IPA noted that Father Coughlin argued that even if the forged and illegitimate *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were not authentic, they were nevertheless “factual” (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1939, p. 5).

Foreshadowing today’s critique by Data & Society founder danah boyd (2018) and others of the “back-fire” effect of media literacy training, the IPA faced criticism that its techniques would make students cynical. Edwards (1938) responded by saying that IPA teachings were needed to prepare students to be engaged citizens:

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<sup>7</sup> Many of the groups currently active were founded by journalists with a passion for educating the public about the importance of journalism and the role of journalists. These include Howard Schneider, the former *Newsday* editor who went on to direct Stony Brook’s Center for News Literacy, and Alan Miller, a former *Los Angeles Times* reporter who founded the News Literacy Project. The project has revived its Newsroom-to-Classroom initiative so that teachers around the United States can bring journalists into their classrooms to talk about how the latter gather information and what makes journalism different from other kinds of information.

<sup>8</sup> In the United States, media literacy efforts are often fragmented and inconsistent, which contributes to the difficulty of measuring their impact. Nor have they been well-funded. Indeed, one study of media literacy funding put the amount at a mere \$12 million between 2006 and 2016.

The teacher who acts as a guide to maturity helps her pupils to think critically and to act intelligently on the everyday problems they are meeting [ . . . ] by its very nature [the] process will not build attitudes of cynicism and defeatism. (p. 38)

### Conclusion

The 2016 elections and the rise of Facebook and Twitter brought about a renewed interest in propaganda, and mis/disinformation and a flurry of commissions, reports, and initiatives emerged (Barr, 2017). Even as a broad consensus developed that there were numerous social harms—such as the incitement of violence, political manipulation, and invasion of privacy, the tech giants funded media literacy efforts as a part of their efforts to avoid regulation. Facebook also denied that the mis/disinformation it circulated had the effects that others claimed.

Just as Miller and the IPA were criticized for overstating the importance of propaganda, so today many argue that mis/disinformation have little effect and criticize media literacy efforts for being unable to demonstrate long-term impact. Access to quality information, the public's ability to discern, and the effects on voting patterns are still important questions just as they were when Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) published *The People's Choice*, arguing that radio, newspaper, and campaign advertising did not affect voting decisions as much as personal interactions did.

In his book on propaganda, Jacques Ellul (1962) weighed in on the influence question, summarizing many of the methodological problems that researchers faced when trying to understand media effects and concluding that surveys are inadequate. Ellul (1962) said that focusing on studies of individuals or small groups was less informative than studying entire societies that have been subjected to propaganda. In some ways the IPA anticipated this point of view, believing that some individuals may be swayed by multiple exposures to mis/disinformation. Today the rise of the anti-vaxxer movement and the spate of killings by White supremacists, who cite phrases used by "conservative media stars," suggest that consumption of incendiary information spread by the media (online or otherwise) influences people's emotions (Peters, Grynbaum, Collins, Harris, & Taylor, 2019, para. 1). The IPA argued that media literacy education cannot be just about looking at facts and images and trying to verify their impact. The sources of the information, the agenda of those sources, and the broader context of the information also matter. Teaching people to question what they are told and to think rationally about the information they consume is as essential now as it was in the 1930s.

Changes in both technology and our understanding of human manipulation (through advances in behavioral science) have changed the nature of propaganda. The IPA did not address the issue of virality (the tendency of certain images, videos, and information to go viral) central to today's debates, and for which there is no constitutional protection. The liberal proclivities of Miller and the IPA might make them hesitant to support anti-virality measures; but the balance between social costs and risks to fundamental freedoms might in the end tip the scales. Other measures, known as "supply side measures" affect the incentives of the propagandist, which were not considered—measures weaker than outright bans but nonetheless affecting the incentives to disseminate mis- and disinformation (Schiffrin, 2017, para. 5). These measures include more accountability for the consequences of what is disseminated—such as the repeal of section 230, which largely frees the tech platforms from intermediary liability. Would Miller and the IPA

consider this too far down the slippery slope undermining free speech? Would they have begrudgingly agreed to the more comprehensive attack on propaganda that some are waging today? The early optimism about human nature and the power of reason they exhibited at their founding might suggest one answer while the hard realities, along with the enormous pushback to their “enlightenment strategy” that they encountered, might suggest another.

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### **Appendix: Timeline**

- July 7, 1888—Clyde Miller is born in Columbus, Ohio.
- March 1, 1916—Miller goes to work at the *Ohio State Journal*.
- 1918—Miller meets Eugene Debs in June in Canton, Ohio. He leaves the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* and goes to do public relations for a Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) education program in France.
- 1919—Miller returns from France and joins an advertising agency, Henderson & Jappe.
- 1924—Miller becomes superintendent of publications for Cleveland public schools and co-founds the Journalism Association of Ohio High Schools (JAOS). He edits an article for teachers called *School Topics* and starts a journalism group for students.
- 1929–1934—Miller teaches summer sessions on education administration at Teachers College, Columbia University.
- 1935—Miller starts at Columbia as associate professor of education at Teachers College.
- 1937—Co-founds the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) with prominent sociologists.
- 1937—Miller publishes the *ABCs of Propaganda Analysis*, co-authored with Violet Edwards.
- October 1937—The IPA launches the *Bulletin* newsletter.
- 1938—Miller publishes an article in the *Ohio State Lantern* where he says that the university should give exams where students have to make “choices,” emphasizing the importance of knowing your own mind and thinking for yourself.
- 1939—*Seven Propaganda Devices* is published.
- 1939—The Commission for Springfield plan is set up.
- 1942–1955—Miller is involved with the promotion of the Springfield Plan.
- January 9, 1942—Final publication of the *Bulletin*.
- 1943—Miller gets reappointed at TC for summer session of 1943. Teaches a course called “sociological and economic foundations,” and is then put on enforced leave of absence without salary (Miller, 1943).
- May 1, 1944–May 1947—Miller is on leave without salary.
- 1945—Springfield plan “unravels,” with superintendent retiring.
- 1946—Miller publishes *Process of Persuasion*.
- 1947—Springfield plan finishes.
- December 29, 1947—Scripps-Howard journalist Frederik Woltman runs two articles in the *World Telegram* attacking the Methodist Federation for Social Action. Miller refutes the attacks.
- 1948—The discussion over the Woltman Affair continues. Miller asks Columbia Journalism School to rescind Woltman’s Pulitzer Prize.
- 1948—Miller officially let go from Columbia.
- 1963—Miller publishes article in *The Progressive* about his experience with Eugene Debs.
- 1971—Miller moves to Australia with his son.
- 1977—After being institutionalized with dementia, Miller dies in Australia.