Who Wants You?
Genre Research into Propaganda Posters

Brolan Springman

Brolan Springman looks at how World War II propaganda posters worked as a genre in the world, using both genre and content research. Springman asks: What is propaganda? Why was it so effective? Why does Uncle Sam have such a condescending demeanor?

If you are interested in World War II (WWII) the way that I am, you may have spent time thinking about the reasons behind the Allied Powers' victory in that conflict. I'd be willing to bet your analysis would include thoughts of the thousands upon thousands of soldiers storming the beaches of Normandy, the atomic bomb, or the constant flow of Russian troops battering Germany from the East. Maybe it was the constantly evolving technological improvements to equipment like tanks and planes. Perhaps it was the way the Great Depression had created unemployed workers enough to fill the spontaneous, urgent need for factory workers, or perhaps it was a combination of all of the above and more. But one thing that had a huge impact on the war that many people might not know about were propaganda posters, which influenced people to buy war bonds, go to work in factories, and join the military forces, but also to grow food at home, carpool, and become stenographers.

Propaganda—information, especially biased or misleading information, specifically designed to influence public opinion—can found in many of the images used by governments during WWII, and during many other times

Figure 1: The classic Uncle Sam image painted by James Montgomery Flagg in 1916–17 ("Uncle Sam [Pointing Finger]").

What's a genre?

Genres are "recognizable responses to recurring situations that accomplish specific social action in the world" ("Genre Research Terms").

in history, but this article focuses specifically on the posters that were printed and distributed across the US and Europe that aimed to influence the behaviors of people during WWII.

Why Propaganda Posters?

I'm kind of a WWII history buff. I am really interested in the images of Uncle Sam that you see on many WWII posters and was interested in learning more about them (see Figure 1). Propaganda posters seemed like a compelling subject to analyze. I was also interested in talking to people about their experiences with the posters, but at the point that I began to focus on posters, I didn't realize that I wouldn't be able to find very many people who had firsthand information about WWII propaganda posters anymore.

Like most writing research, the ways that propaganda posters impacted people's activities in WWII is, according to one source, "a rather complex topic," but research that I was prepared to undertake nonetheless ("History of American Propaganda Posters"). Ultimately, I decided to study the **genre** of propaganda posters in WWII to try to understand (1) what a propaganda poster is and (2) what it's supposed to do and what the creators were trying to achieve in terms of shaping people's behavior in different ways.

But Wait, What IS Propaganda, Anyway?

I understood the idea that the Uncle Sam posters from WWII were designed to shape people's behavior, and the word I'd heard used to describe that was propaganda. But what is propaganda, exactly? When researching the goals of these posters—that is, how they actually impacted people's behaviors—I felt like I first needed to understand what that term means. According to communications researcher Alexander Laskin, discussions of propaganda often tend to overlap this term with others, like advertising, marketing, and public relations. Propaganda, Laskin explains, can be "a strategy of dissolving individuality and uniting people into homogeneous groups" with

a goal of "creating a reason for an individual to perform an action outside of this individual's direct benefit, for example, people may be required to sacrifice their personal benefit in the name of god, society, country, political party, and so on." Laskin also writes that propaganda

> allow[s] a person to merge with something big and important, therefore creating meaning beyond an individual's life … In the end, people willingly engage in propaganda because, although sacrificing something, they receive unity with the bigger powers of other people, organizations, political parties, countries, and so on. As a result, such persons are not alone against the world; they are now a part of a bigger and stronger union.

The idea of connecting to something bigger (some larger community goal related to organizations, political parties, countries, etc.) means that lots of persuasive texts that would be considered advertising wouldn't be propaganda. That is, an advertisement trying to get you to buy something wouldn't be propaganda (an ad for Honey Nut Cheerios is usually not labeled propaganda, for example) while an advertisement that tries to get people to enlist in the army or support a cause would be more likely to fit under the genre of propaganda. There seems to be a bit of a gray area when it comes to campaign advertisements. The advertisement itself is (surprise, surprise) an advertisement, but these ads can also be propaganda because they

1. Include biased information,
2. Work to influence your opinion of a person or idea, and
3. Attempt to connect you to a larger cause or idea or goal that you share with others.

With this propaganda definition, I was ready to discover more genre conventions.

A Quick Pause for a History Lesson About Uncle Sam (Get Ready to Skim)

To get started trying to uncover the conventions of propaganda posters, I decided to first do a little bit of background research on the image of Uncle Sam, which was one of the key images used in propaganda posters during WWII (see Figure 1). This was also the image that got me interested in this topic. Just as a note, the work I did to find these next gems of information would be considered **content research**, which is different from the genre research I did to study the WWII propaganda posters as a particular kind of text. Content research is "the practice of seeking, finding, and processing

information from a variety of places" ("Content Research Terms"). For this particular topic, my content research about the history of the Uncle Sam image is certainly drawn from a "variety of places," from Encyclopedia Britannica and Wikipedia, to Time magazine, National Geographic, and Atlas Obscura.

The image of Uncle Sam is a nationally accepted symbol for the United States government, probably derived from two earlier American characters, Yankee Doodle and Brother Jonathan, and it actually became the iconic image we still see today during WWI rather than WWII. Yankee Doodle (or Yankees) was a name commonly used by the British for American colonists during the American Revolution ("Uncle Sam," Britannica), while Brother Jonathan started out as a caricature the British used during the same revolutionary war and was featured in many political cartoons and pamphlets during that time (and for many years afterward) to represent themes of American independence (as a bit of a trickster character) (Braun).

The name Uncle Sam is thought to come from Samuel Wilson, an American entrepreneur who fought in the American Revolution. Later, he built a meat packing facility, E&S Wilson, with his brother Ebenezer and shipped packages of beef to soldiers in the War of 1812. The shipped packages were marked "US" to indicate United States government property, but the soldiers associated "US" with "Uncle Sam," which then became his nickname ("Samuel Wilson").

Figure 2: 1914 poster of British Army officer, Lord Herbert Kitchener ("Kitchener-Britons").

In 1916, 133 years after the end of the Revolutionary War, illustrator James Montgomery Flagg created the first version of the Uncle Sam we know today (Knauer) and that I shared in Figure 1 earlier. According to Time magazine history writer Kelly Knauer, "The image first appeared on the cover of the July 6, 1916, issue of Leslie's Weekly magazine with the title 'What Are You Doing for Preparedness?'" Flagg based Uncle Sam's facial expression and pose on British war hero Lord Kitchener (Figure 2), drawn and posterized by Alfred Leete in 1914. Comparing the two, you can see how Flagg mimics the pose and catchphrase of Lord Kitchener but gives Uncle Sam a stern, commanding demeanor. A year later, the United States Army would change the

Figure 3: The classic Uncle Sam from 1916 to 1917 in a WWI recruitment poster ("Uncle Sam Wants You for Army").

Figure 4: 1943 Uncle Sam WWII poster ("You've Got What It Takes Soldier").

poster slightly to encourage people to join the fight against the Axis Powers (Figure 3). About four million Uncle Sam posters were produced between 1917 and 1918 during WWI, and this image was used again in WWII (Knauer). In addition to the iconic poster shown in Figure 3, images of Uncle Sam were adapted for a huge range of different purposes, from political cartoons to advertisements, including a range of propaganda posters during WWII (Figure 4).

WWII Posters and the Behaviors They Tried to Influence

Uncle Sam notwithstanding, WWII posters actually dealt with a huge range of topics and used a lot of different kinds of images in order to do their work. So, my next task was to try to understand the genre conventions by doing **genre research**, which is "the practice of investigating how we learn about and understand specific genres in use in the world, including the people, tools, and recurring situations that influence how texts get produced in a genre" ("Genre Research Terms").

So, if one genre criteria of a propaganda poster is that it contains propaganda, then another would be that it has to be a poster, right? Wikipedia gets it right this time when it describes a poster as "a large sheet that is placed either on a public space to promote something or on a wall as decoration" ("Poster"). Typically, posters include both textual and graphic elements, although a poster may be either wholly graphical or wholly text. Posters are designed to be both eye-catching and informative" ("Poster").

Genre conventions

We recognize genres through their conventions: elements that might be visible (length, language, content, format, modes) and those we can't see and have to infer instead (why these elements? valued by whom? for what purposes?) ("Genre Research Terms").

As we move specifically to WWII propaganda posters in the US (and almost all of the posters I studied were created and printed in the United States), we can get a little bit more specific in creating our initial list of **genre conventions**. Most propaganda posters printed by the US government during this era were around 51 x 72″ or 71 x 102″ and made of paper. They often depicted an American hero helping in the war effort. The American hero might be Uncle Sam punching someone in the face, women joining the workforce, or just a common soldier fighting on the front line. In most cases, these posters were designed to be inspirational, and they were often trying to get viewers to adjust their behavior. Specific goals of these posters might be to get viewers to do practical things, like planting a victory garden (Figure 5). They were posted in government-regulated spaces like post offices, courthouses, railroad stations, and schools. Smaller versions of these posters were also printed so that people could display them in their businesses or homes ("American Propaganda During WWII"). These posters focused on a huge range of activities, from saving waste greases and fats, joining the workforce (which targeted women in particular), or donating scrap metal. Other posters asked viewers to spend money by buying war bonds or to support the war effort more actively by joining the military. The goal focused on trying to help the war effort in some way. The posters not only worked toward convincing people to do something; they were also designed to make people feel like part of a bigger, important story.

Figure 5: An example of a propaganda poster that tries to convince readers to do something practical to help the war effort, like plant a garden ("Your Victory Garden").

Despite a large number of propaganda posters having a generally uplifting message, some posters utilized the already existing fear and tension brought about by the war to their advantage. These posters might show images like drowning sailors who supposedly died at sea in a German U-boat attack (Figure 6) informed by an incredibly vast spy network that took information from citizens who were casually talking about the location of their loved ones fighting in the war (Durchholz).

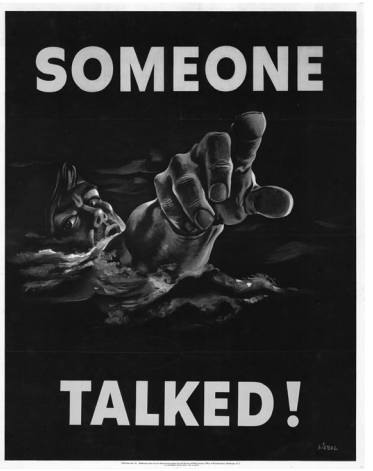

Figure 6: An example of a propaganda poster that uses fear and tension to persuade viewers not to talk about the locations of soldiers ("Someone Talked").

What Grabs Your Attention?

So now you know a little about the goals of propaganda posters, and the subject matter they covered. Now what? Well, you might want to check out more posters archived online at the Northwestern Libraries WWII Poster collection (Figure 7) or the US National Archives collection of persuasive posters (Figure 8) to do a bit more of your own genre research. Once you've checked out the QR codes and investigated some of the posters, you might have noticed some similarities in the American posters. For example, I noticed that many of them feature at least some amount of red, white, and blue. This is for two reasons:

1. Red, white, and blue are commonly associated with the United States because of the US flag.
2. Having a few main colors in a picture helps to ensure that the picture remains balanced; having too many colors in a picture detracts from the overall message.

Figure 7: A QR code to the Northwestern Libraries "World War II Poster Collection."

Figure 8: A QR code to the US National Archives online exhibit, "Powers of Persuasion."

Although lots of propaganda posters had red, white, and blue in their designs, some posters that had more negative kinds of content, like warnings, used darker colors. For example, posters like the one that depicts a drowning sailor in Figure 5 typically utilized black more than other posters at the time. These posters with darker colors or negative themes were often focused on fear (like the fear of being invaded or the fear of inadvertently sharing classified information). The color palette used in

these posters was designed to impact reception. **Reception** helps us to focus on the way texts are designed to reach audiences in particular ways, although viewers or readers may take up texts in a whole range of unexpected ways ("Literate Activity Terms").

One of the targeted receptions for the drowning sailor poster was specifically related to a "careless talk" campaign in the US and Great Britain, which was designed to prevent citizens from inadvertently sharing information that could be used by spies to aid the enemy. This worked particularly well in WWII because a large number of people had someone close to them fighting in the war, so posters that reminded people that any information they shared could put their loved ones in danger were highly effective (Durchholz).

Another convention of an effective propaganda poster was a memorable, typically short message that could make the viewer notice it and pay attention to the message, which is also related to choices for bold color schemes. Often, an effective propaganda poster also forced the viewer to pick a side. For example, a considerable number of posters used Hitler as a clear enemy—the direct opposite of supporting the Allied forces and the American hero in other posters—so those posters worked well with people who didn't want to be considered Nazis or wanted to think of themselves as opposing Hitler. In fact, the use of negative images of Hitler or posters that encourage people to reject propaganda they might have heard from Axis forces were a common theme for propaganda posters during the war (Figure 9). Additionally, the idea of peer pressure (what others would think of you if you did or didn't follow the directions on the poster) definitely played a part in recruitment posters, making them all the more effective (Durchholz).

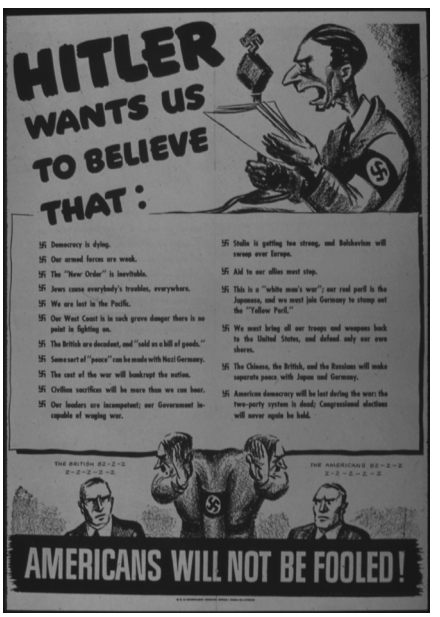

Figure 9: An example of a poster that portrays Hitler as an enemy trying to fool Americans with propaganda ("Hitler Wants Us to Believe").

Doing Our Own Genre Analysis

I wanted to close with Figures 10 through 12 to emphasize that the genre conventions of specific kinds of posters I've shared in this article don't just exist in one text! Viewers would have seen many of the same kinds of posters, multiple texts and multiple versions of them, with the same range of activities (like

Figure 10: In this war bonds poster, Uncle Sam proudly ushers forth troops into battle. Note the use of color: amidst the drab browns and blacks of war, Uncle Sam stands tall, powerful, and ever patriotic in his red, white, and blue ("Uncle Sam—Buy War Bonds").

While the poster itself only has the words "BUY WAR BONDS" on it, the message of this poster is so much deeper. How are your troops being protected? By buying war bonds, you can ensure Uncle Sam stands right there with your loved one on the front line.

Figure 11: Some of you might know the iconic image of Rosie the Riveter, which started out as a WWII poster. This is another poster that was part of efforts to get women to contribute to the war effort by becoming stenographers. The poster suggests to viewers to "get civil service information" at their local post offices ("Victory Waits on Your Fingers").

Again, with only a few words in two short messages, the poster calls women to participate in the activity of war. What can you do to ensure victory? You don't have to be a soldier; you can work for the US government as a stenographer.

gardening, collecting scrap, or working in an office) and the same range of visible textual features that make them recognizable as propaganda posters. I wanted to share these posters to think about how the genre of WWII posters is visible in more than one of each kind of poster. Of course, you can do more content research about WWII (using the QR codes in Figures 7 and 8) to find even more posters and think about how they respond to the recurring situation of WWII and take up specific genre conventions—that is, if you are a WWII history buff like me.

Figure 12: This is another poster designed to encourage people to plant victory gardens to grow food at home to help supplement food shortages. This poster is an example of positive-message propaganda posters. Not only are the colors used here red, white, and blue, but the overall look of the poster is quite cheerful ("Plant a Victory Garden").

The poster again calls for people to participate in the war effort using the short message, "Our food is fighting."

Propaganda, due to the nature of what it is, is always trying to get you to do something with your reception of the genre. Take a second and look again at the posters in Figures 2 through 6. Aren't Uncle Sam and Lord Kitchener trying to get you to enlist in the army in Figures 2, 3, and 4? One might see the authority figure and decide that they should do what they say. People at home in the US might look at Figure 5 and decide to plant a garden. Someone might see Figure 6 and decide to err on the side of caution when sharing information. And they would have been exposed to multiple attempts to get them to do so, in posters that have slightly different messages, colors, images, and suggestions.

Wrapping It Up

So what have we learned? If you've come along with me for this research journey, you've learned some of the key genre conventions of WWII propaganda posters and some of the kinds of activity that the posters were trying to get people to engage in or not engage in. You've learned about some of the tools these posters used, such as impactful words (and not very many of them), bold, contrastive colors, and the use of different kinds of graphical elements like font choices, bolding, underlining, italicizing, and more.

So what? How does any of this affect anyone? Well, of course these WWII posters are not part of our present world, but attempts at propaganda didn't end with WWII. And in order to understand how different kinds of

propaganda might be working (even more subtly in the age of the internet, where sites can draw people in and into propaganda in very subtle ways), it can help to understand these texts as a genre. You can ask questions about who made the text, what their goals are, and what larger groups and organizations the texts might be trying to get readers to affiliate with. I think this article does show how both genre research and content research can help you ask these kinds of questions about texts you see in the world around you every day.

But even with that in mind, my final takeaways related to doing research and writing about it include recognizing that failure is part of the process: You will fail. You will struggle with your research. You will make grammatical errors and people may judge them. Cats will conspire against you. But you will probably prevail. Or you won't. In which case, you should try again.

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Notes