

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 11 | Issue 1

Article 2

2023

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Recommended Citation

Hernandez, Adam D. (2023) "Bell Pottinger: Pre-Digital Fake News During the Rise of Neoliberalism," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 2.

DOI: 10.25148/CRCP.10.2.010587

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol11/iss1/2>

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Bell Pottinger: Pre-Digital Fake News During the Rise of Neoliberalism

Abstract

This article will follow the rise of Bell Pottinger, a PR company whose emergence coincided with the rise of Thatcherism in the 80s and was instrumental in promoting neoliberal ideology to the public in the U.K. and globally in the late 20th century. Discourse on the “fake news” phenomenon is often centered around the prevalence of disinformation proliferated on social media and the internet by actors willing to push political agendas. Less attention has been placed on the activity of similar actors engaging in the spreading of political propaganda before the widespread adoption of the internet by the masses. An analysis of Bell Pottinger’s operations in the pre-digital era show a pattern of support for neoliberal politicians and regimes, going so far as to carry out political propaganda campaigns for autocratic actors.

Introduction: Bell Pottinger's Place in Neoliberalism

The case of Bell Pottinger showcases the rise of the disinformation firm as a key player within the corporate power structure during the period of neoliberal capitalism. While Bell Pottinger survived through the 2010s, making a transition into the field of computational propaganda as the internet became more readily available, this article will mainly focus on the firm's genesis and actions until before the period of the Arab Spring, which was both a turning point for neoliberalism internationally and reflected the vast scale of utilizing the internet and social media in producing political propaganda. The case of Bell Pottinger showcases how the disinformation firm used the expertise of public relations professionals within the UK and internationally to promote a political and economic agenda backed by corporate lobbyists and think-tanks. Bell Pottinger assisted Margaret Thatcher in securing electoral victories domestically, while also advancing a neoliberal policy agenda abroad, often by aligning with autocrats who took advantage of neoliberal policies to secure political power. Bell Pottinger utilized the connections its founder Tim Bell had formed under Thatcher to win lucrative contracts abroad.

In truth, Bell Pottinger has taken multiple forms during its lengthy span of existence. It was founded by Tim Bell, a prominent figure in public relations who earned his prominence thanks to his work in getting Margaret Thatcher elected. Bell was working under Saatchi & Saatchi throughout the first half of the 80s. He would leave in 1985 to form the PR firm Lowe Bell, which would then be subsumed into Chime Communications in 1994 and become Bell Pottinger. For the sake of simplicity and to not get lost in focusing on just the man known as Tim Bell himself, the work of Lord Bell, his inner circle, and his employees will be put under the "Bell Pottinger" umbrella during this analysis. This then allows for a focus on the analysis of the creation of the disinformation firm rather than a historical piece on the multitude of forms Tim Bell's firm has taken.¹

Bell Pottinger is the precursor to the modern disinformation firm, one of a generation of PR companies that rose to prominence at a key moment in the 20th century which saw a transformation of liberalism across the globe. The post-WW2 status quo in nations such as the United States and United Kingdom saw the use of regulated capitalism. This period saw strong state intervention and Keynesian economics derived from a compromise between corporations and labor that was made possible by the fears associated with the rise of communism at the time. Under regulated capitalism, a regulatory state used a mix of taxation, spending and regulatory policies to increase the role of the state in curbing practices conducted by the private sector. Under this system, there was greater taxation of corporate entities, more limits on international trade and capital flows, and greater social spending. This period saw trade unions grow in strength and numbers, albeit integrated into the management structure of big business. There were stable labor relations, a rise in economic growth and productivity compared to previous capitalist eras, and a lack of severe recessions until the stagflation of the 1970s.²

¹ Bates, Stephan. "Lord Bell Obituary." *The Guardian*.

² Kotz, David. *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*. Page 62.

The mid-1960s and 1970s saw the beginning of the end for this status quo as dominant economic powers with welfare systems in place were challenged by economic competition from states like Germany & Japan. The challenges this competition posed to already established global corporations began to produce cracks in the system. The stagflation crisis of the 1970s suddenly saw broader corporate support for a rollback of state regulation, taxation, and intervention in the economy.³ The corporate coalition of economic elites who had supported regulated capitalism since the Great Depression began to fracture in the face of stagnating profits.⁴ In the United Kingdom dominant firms in the finance, oil, gas, and real-estate sectors began to oppose regulated capitalism by the 1970s. When these firms began to see dips in their long-term profits, they began to develop and fund neoliberalism as a project to alleviate their profit losses.⁵

The rate of profit for the globally dominant Fortune 500 corporations experienced a steady decline from 1965-1982. As a result, the most global and profitable corporations began to aggressively lobby for the reversal of policies implemented by governments during the period of regulated capitalism. This was advocated publicly as a necessary solution to the economic woes that had impacted the general public, but also served as a means of keeping these entrenched economic elites in power. There were greater calls to reduce taxation on corporations, reduce social regulation, and increase subsidies to incentivize investment. Corporate coalitions began a systematic critique of the welfare state and the left-leaning political parties that supported it.⁶ Corporate lobbies, think tanks and conservative political movements promoted powerful neoliberal figures such as Thatcher and Reagan, who fought for these policies with the support of a coalition of powerful economic elites. These politicians emerged at the beginning of neoliberal policy changes in their respective nations, in part due to their promises that their policies would alleviate the economic burden on the middle class and put their nations' economic elites back on top. The liberalization of the global market and reduction of social benefits were the means by which they could bring about these promises.⁷

These investment coalitions shape policy agendas, provide a conduit between the private sector and the state, and as such are institutionalized within dominant governing coalitions, enabled by blocs of investors and voting coalitions.⁸ As corporate profit rates had been in long-term decline, corporations responded by increasing their lobbying, investing greater amounts of money into the political sphere, and using think-tanks to pressure political parties to move towards the right, particularly in terms of economic policy.⁹

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey argues that neoliberalism was created as a project designed to substantially enhance the power of domestic and global elites.¹⁰

³ Cox, Ronald. Skidmore-Hess, Daniel. *US Politics & the Global Economy: Corporate Power, Conservative Shift*. Pages 8-10.

⁴ Ibid. Page 6.

⁵ Christophers, Brett. *Rentier Capitalism: Who Owns the Economy, and Who Pays for It?* Page 24.

⁶ Cox, Ronald. Skidmore-Hess, Daniel. *US Politics & the Global Economy: Corporate Power, Conservative Shift*. Page 161.

⁷ Ibid. Page 167.

⁸ Ferguson, Thomas. Rogers, Joel. *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics*. Page 45.

⁹ Ibid. Page 105.

¹⁰ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press. Page 19.

Neoliberalism is associated with utilizing political policies that favor enhancing the power of private actors while reeling back institutions and policies that protect the middle and working class. This includes shifting the tax burden from the rich to the middle class, the privatization and monetization of markets, weakening unions, and seeking to expand markets abroad by opening up other nations to similar neoliberal practices.¹¹

Many of these policies are ones that would not be traditionally popular among the working class of a nation, as they would involve deliberately weakening institutions that directly assist them in favor of policies which further empower already powerful economic actors. Furthermore, most industrialized countries post-WW2 favored a strong welfare state which neoliberal actors would need to tear down. As such, political actors favoring neoliberalism would need to go about the construction of a “new common sense,” a pitch in which they argue that these policies will eventually yield greater benefits to individuals through empowering the market rather than through the provision of state welfare. Political parties were still required to win elections, even if their financiers vastly supported neoliberal politics. The success of the neoliberal project relied on broad public support for politicians who favored neoliberal policies and solutions. Rejection from the general public threatened to prevent neoliberal policies from fully being implemented, and as such, the reversal of the policies of regulated capitalism and subsequent greater increase of privatization was dependent on their ability to sell neoliberalism as the best solution possible for the problems ailing the public at the time.¹²

It is at this crossroads where the Disinformation Firm exists within democratic politics. These firms were enlisted by politicians and corporations to promote neoliberal policies as in the best interests of middle- and working-class voters. Disinformation firms used their expertise associated with selling a product in consumer markets to sell neoliberalism as an ideology so that enough voters could be convinced to give up a welfare state that provided social benefits in favor of policies that offered direct assistance to economic elites. For this to work, corporate elites and politicians promoting neoliberalism enlisted PR firms to garner public support by any means necessary. The methods of corporate PR firms included propaganda, disinformation, and utter ruthlessness towards political opponents who threatened to obstruct neoliberal hegemony. The rise of disinformation firms would be a political innovation that would change the nature of democratic politics.

This was something beyond the government-produced political propaganda of the past, or the use of mainstream news media to spin certain narratives. This was about getting experts who knew how to produce commercials, who knew how to run broad public relations campaigns to get the general public to buy a product. This was a huge, powerful sector, already entrenched within a corporate advertising and PR sector that had rapidly expanded since the end of World War 2. What separates the actions of the world of PR from previous political propagandists can be best summed up by Nigel Oakes, former employee of Bell Pottinger and founder of Cambridge Analytica’s holding company SCL Group, who said “The greatest change that has happened with influence occurred when the scientific world began to realize that it wasn’t about what you said... the answer was in the audience.” These are experts who innovated how to sell messages

¹¹ Ibid. Page 33.

¹² Ibid. Page 19.

to human beings, who used scientific and business know-how to truly understand how to best sell one product against another in the most efficient way possible.¹³

The economic crises of the 1970s, which impacted the economies of nations like the US and United Kingdom, allowed advocates of neoliberalism a chance to convince the public that neoliberal policies were a favorable solution for their economic woes. Supporting political parties advocating for neoliberal politics, including powerful political figures such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, firms such as Bell Pottinger, who already originated from the private sector, could apply their expertise in public relations to efficiently convince the general public that these solutions were the best solutions to vote for. These practices continue to this day, having evolved from the time of printed press into the digital age with firms such as Cambridge Analytics and the Archimedes Group. Today these firms operate in a very different status quo, one in which neoliberalism is in far greater crisis in a post-great recession world, but their support for neoliberal policies and their use of disinformation continues. These campaigns are run by professionals from a line of work that had expanded greatly and revised its toolsets constantly in order to maximize profits for their clients.

In the United Kingdom, corporate access to policymaking increased dramatically during the 70s, and especially the 80s, as a result of this broad push for neoliberal policies.¹⁴ This led to a reduction of taxation, the privatization of previously public services, and a rise of public subsidies for British corporations that allowed for a rentier class of economic elites to increase profits at the expense of societal growth. The post-WW2 economy of Britain saw financial and land-owning interests, the dominant forms of rentierism, limited by the government. By the 1950s, there were some who would predict that there would be full land nationalization in the future. The economy was tightly directed in this time period, but the 1970s brought crisis to the British economic model, and the 1980s provided opportunities for corporate elites to promote changes to the system. The rise of neoliberalism in this period brought about mass privatization, corporate subsidization, financialization that strengthened private sector power within the state, a process that would be facilitated with the rise of Bell Pottinger.¹⁵

The founder of Bell Pottinger would be Tim Bell, who masterminded the “Labour Isn’t Working” campaign for Margaret Thatcher’s electoral efforts. Bell Pottinger as a corporate entity did not exist yet. Instead, Tim Bell was working for Saatchi & Saatchi, one of the largest PR companies in the world. Saatchi & Saatchi’s status as a powerful PR company allowed it to secure a contract with the Conservative Party, and the Conservative Party’s great wealth allowed for it to afford Saatchi & Saatchi. The success of “Labour Isn’t Working” allowed for Tim Bell to score a notable reputation as a PR expert and granted him numerous connections in the world of politics needed to eventually found Bell Pottinger. These connections could then be leveraged to find Bell Pottinger work not just locally but globally. Thanks to his connections with Thatcher, Tim Bell could get through the door to sell his services to other political allies of the Conservative Party abroad. Likewise, you could now hire the company founded by the man who helped Thatcher secure her political victories, for a price. Bell Pottinger suddenly found itself operating in South Africa, Iraq, Chile, Belarus, and numerous other nations across the globe. As

¹³ Influence: 24:00 to 25:30.

¹⁴ Christophers, Brett. *Rentier Capitalism: Who Owns the Economy, and Who Pays for It?* Page 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Page 4.

money flooded in support for privatization and other neoliberal policies, Bell Pottinger was a potential service to purchase for powerful political and economic actors attempting to secure victory and power. In this, we see Bell Pottinger acting as a champion for the defense and adoption of neoliberal politics at a time where it was well- positioned within international politics. In doing so, we can clearly see the firm acting as a privatized political actor seeking to protect and expand the interests of important sectors of Britain's economy as well.

Origins: Neoliberalism and Bell Pottinger's Shared Origins in the United Kingdom

The rise of neoliberalism did not come overnight to Britain. Unlike the United States, the nation had a relatively entrenched welfare state post-WW2. It was well-developed and politically accepted. Thus, the rise of neoliberalism was not an inevitability, rather it was a conscious movement by powerful economic actors within the nation. The Labour Party had succeeded in securing a great amount of political power since the 1930s, many of the United Kingdom's most successful industries were nationalized, and even when in power, the Conservative Party rarely attacked the nation's welfare structure.¹⁶ However, a financial crisis in the 1970s substantially damaged Britain's economy. It would be this financial crisis which would give right-wing political actors the opportunity to pitch neoliberal politics as a solution to the nation's economic woes.¹⁷ These actors did not come out of nowhere, many of them had been pitching such policies since the 1950s but had yet to pierce the mainstream. Their rise to power was gradual. The UK government began securing London's place as a financial power, one of the last vestiges of Great Britain's old imperial power structure. However, the stagflation the UK suffered from in the 70s was what truly allowed for the corporate sector, led by the London's financial district, to pitch neoliberalism as a powerful economic solution.¹⁸

Much of the early support for neoliberalism originated from corporate-funded think tanks. Neoliberal policies had been slowly pitched to professionals, academics, and the public by institutions such as the Centre for Policy Studies, the Adam Smith Institute, and the Institute of Economic Affairs since the 1950s. These actors did not just sell neoliberalism to professionals and politicians but were among the first organizations to understand that they had to pitch their ideas to the press. They also received considerable contributions from corporate interests, such as from powerful economic elites like Rupert Murdoch. Experts such as Keith Joseph, who originated from the IEA, and would go on to be a key advisor for Margaret Thatcher, rose to prominence among experts in the 1970s. These think tanks were very successful at taking advantage of youth groups, particularly within universities at the time. They did this through advocating neoliberalism through individualist ideals and presenting it as an ideology which challenged traditional class structures.¹⁹ Corporate lobbyists, oftentimes funded by the actors already described, were essential to pitching neoliberalism to politicians. Lobbyists convinced politicians that neoliberalism would be quite profitable. After all, many of Britain's largest and

¹⁶ Ibid. Page 55.

¹⁷ Rustin, Mike. "From the Beginning to the End of Neo-Liberalism in Britain." OpenDemocracy.

¹⁸ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press. Page 56.

¹⁹ Ibid. Page 57.

most lucrative industries, such as coal, steel and automobiles were nationalized. Privatizing these markets would generate a significant windfall of profits.²⁰

Powerful players within the press such as Rupert Murdoch were also important in not just funding think tanks such as the IEA but also using his publishing company, Murdoch Press, as a means of advertising neoliberalism as an economic solution to the financial crisis. The influence of Rupert Murdoch and NewsCorp on British politics cannot be understated. NewsCorp, Rupert Murdoch's company, has long been able to hold great political power due to its ability to control critical nodal points in modern society, such as the media, business, and economic networks. NewsCorp has managed to sway political narratives, and thus controlling the conversation in politics, through political brokering, leveraging public opinion, institutionalizing sensationalist media, and diversifying media holdings. Significant power-brokers within corporate elite networks already supported neoliberal policies, which provided the foundations for leveraging financial support that could help politicians supporting these policies get elected.²¹ This would mean convincing the public to vote for politicians advancing neoliberal policies.

Margaret Thatcher emerged as a central figure in the ascendancy of neoliberal ideology. Thatcher was the president of the Centre for Policy Studies, a prior-mentioned thinktank which developed neoliberal policies and strategies for how to advocate for them.²² Margaret Thatcher's political program advanced the goals of corporate lobbyists. From 1984 to 1990, the Thatcher administration privatized more than 42 businesses. In addition, her policies were particularly aimed towards weakening unions and dismantling the welfare state.²³ Thatcher's influence did not even end with the conclusion of her administration. Her policies did not just successfully implement neoliberalism in England, but also created a status quo that institutionalized business lobbying within British politics. Her influence on neoliberalism can even be felt today, as many of her allies still maintain influential positions in political lobbying. This includes figures such as Nigel Lawson, a former chancellor of Margaret Thatcher who has written for Global Warming Policy Foundation, a climate skeptic policy group.²⁴

This is where Tim Bell, the eventually founder of Bell Pottinger steps in. Bell was working in PR in the firm Saatchi & Saatchi at the time, having been picked by the Saatchi brothers who ran the company to work on the company's lucrative contract for Margaret Thatcher and the conservatives as she ran for office. This would come as no surprise. Saatchi & Saatchi is one of the largest PR companies in the world. Furthermore, the company has typically had ties to the conservative wing of British politics. In 1983, Saatchi & Saatchi would work for the Tories, notably creating a "Labour says he's black. Tories say he's British" poster depicting a black man. In 1992, they would once again take a contract with the Conservative Party, with two of their prominent works from this campaign being their "Defence" poster depicting a porcupine with a full back of pricks labeled "Conservative", alongside a smaller, prickled porcupine labeled

²⁰ Cave, Tamasin, and Andy Rowell. *A Quiet Word: Lobbying, Crony Capitalism and Broken Politics in Britain*. Random House. Location 654.

²¹ Arsenault, Amelia, and Manuel Castells. "Switching Power: Rupert Murdoch and the Global Business of Media Politics: A Sociological Analysis." *International Sociology* 23. Page 488.

²² Cave, Tamasin, and Andy Rowell. *A Quiet Word: Lobbying, Crony Capitalism and Broken Politics in Britain*. Random House. Location 641.

²³ *Ibid.* Location 657.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Location 2102.

“Labour” in addition to a poster of a bombshell labeled “You’d pay 1250 (pounds) more tax a year under Labour.”²⁵ The company would also have a contract for the conservatives in 1997, conducting the “New Labour, New Danger” campaign. In addition, one of the brothers who owned the company, Maurice Saatchi, was an outspoken conservative who joined the House of Lords in 1996, often arguing for the cutting of taxes.²⁶

Tim Bell’s work for Thatcher was considered revolutionary at the time. He was the mastermind behind the “Labour Isn’t Working” campaign in 1979, a campaign which proved to be very successful for the Conservative Party. Bell’s expertise in PR was essential to revolutionizing the political campaign and in getting the public to accept neoliberalism. As a PR consultant, Bell advised Thatcher’s interviewing techniques, regulated how she dressed, and even how her hair was styled. The “Labour Isn’t Working” campaign sought to discredit the left of Britain, blaming them and the welfare state for the country’s financial crisis. It was this campaign which ingrained itself in the UK’s public consciousness, convincing the nation’s population that public institutions, unions, and leftwing policies were bad for the economic state of the country. Most infamously, this campaign involved a flier which depicted long lines of unemployed workers. In reality, the lines depicted on these fliers did not even exist, as they were nothing more than conservative party volunteers posing for the campaign.²⁷ Ultimately, Tim Bell was a PR man, and his strategy for a Conservative Party victory favored playing on the emotions of voters, even at the expense of the truth, as long as it secured victory. Bell’s expertise involved selling customers a product, and this was evident in his public presentations. When speaking about his political work, Lord Bell wrote in his memoirs “Why tell the truth when a lie will do?” He would write: “I am a moral man (but) there were many times when I would adopt the same philosophy.” In his own writings, he admits to his distortion of the facts, “We could in those days find statistics that proved anything ... you could argue we were always trying to stretch the truth, but then everybody was at the time.”²⁸

Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party’s electoral success would see the UK adopt many neoliberal policies, as promised. The government sold off more than 42 businesses which employed nearly a million workers. Working class institutions were weakened, trade unions were weakened, and there was a privatization of public utilities. These were changes that left the bargaining power and morale of workers weakened and created a status quo that favored economic elites within British society. Lord Bell’s campaign was so successful that he and Thatcher were said to have maintained personal ties even after they stopped working together. Thatcher’s political successes changed the status quo of British politics to the point where, when the Labour Party rebranded itself in 1997 successfully and won, it did little to change what the Conservatives had done and made little attempts to go back to the welfare state of old.²⁹

While Bell Pottinger as a company would not exist until after the rise of Thatcher, its origins ultimately lie in the “Labour Isn’t Working” campaign, which is essential to understanding the

²⁵ Townshendj. Archives and manuscripts at the bodleian library. Bodleian Libraries.

²⁶ BBC. (2003, November 10). UK | Politics | Profile: Lord Saatchi.

²⁷ Shipman, Alan. “How(e) 'Labour Isn't Working' Did the Job for the Conservatives.” OpenLearn. The Open University.

²⁸ Bates, Stephan. “Lord Bell Obituary.” The Guardian.

²⁹ Rustin, Mike. “From the Beginning to the End of Neo-Liberalism in Britain.” OpenDemocracy.

company's origins. Tim Bell left the Saatchis in 1985, a departure that led to the creation of Bell Pottinger. The company, founded in 1994 as Lowe Bell, would eventually be known as Bell Pottinger by 1998 after co-founder Frank Rowe quit and requested that his name no longer be associated with the company.³⁰ He founded the company with another PR figure, Franke Rowe, who ultimately split from Bell's company and had very little influence on its long-term narrative. The company was first named Lowe Bell before, in 1998, it was renamed to Bell Pottinger after Franke Rowe demanded the company be renamed.³¹ Without the political infamy Bell's work for Saatchi & Saatchi earned him, Bell Pottinger may not have been founded, and it definitely would not have won the company the lucrative contracts abroad it would gain over the years. This success cemented a relationship between the corporate power structure and Bell Pottinger, which would then go about enforcing the political ideology abroad, both to secure political allies and bring about new allies. We can see how Bell Pottinger's prior connections with the neoliberal movement helped it secure success early on in its existence from Tim Bell himself. Tim Bell has publicly spoke about how he used Margaret Thatcher's support to get him phone calls straight to world leaders, such as FW de Klerk. Politicians, particularly allies of Margaret Thatcher, were well-informed of Tim Bell's work for her campaign, and his PR work was given a lot of credit for its success by the Conservative Party.³² This allowed for Bell Pottinger to not only a lot of room to navigate politically in terms of finding clients interested in its services, it allowed the company to charge a great amount of money for its services.

Bell Pottinger would take on numerous contracts of a political sort from its founding to before the Arab Spring in 2011. These would range from being hired by arms manufacturers such as BAE and former neoliberal despots such as Pinochet. However, the two most prominent and striking cases that point towards Bell Pottinger's role within a corporate power structure are its contracts with FW de Klerk during South Africa's first post-Apartheid elections in 1994 and with the US military during the occupation of Iraq during the War on Terror. These cases showcase Bell Pottinger's willingness to work with neoliberal autocrats who seek to use their state power to open up new markets for Britain.

Early Bell Pottinger: In Defense of Neoliberalism & Apartheid in South Africa

Bell Pottinger's ties to the corporate power structure and neoliberalism deepened beyond its British origins to include a significant impact on global politics. As Harvey describes, a key component of the corporate lobbying for neoliberal policies was to increase profits and to reduce costs. As part of that strategy, corporate support for neoliberalism involved using neoliberal ideology to promote opening new markets for trade and foreign investment, which has historically been viewed as part of the "solution" to capitalist crises. The global expansion of neoliberalism became a key concept of Bell Pottinger's mission statement. Bell Pottinger promoted policies that sought to advance the "increasing geographical mobility of capital," as Harvey puts it, or the outsourcing of labor and production contracts within an increasingly globalized system of capitalist production which would help define neoliberal capitalism.³³ One

³⁰ Bates, Stephan. "Lord Bell Obituary." *The Guardian*.

³¹ "82. Sir Frank Lowe." *The Guardian*.

³² Influence: 28:30 to 29:30.

³³ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press. Page 92.

of Bell Pottinger's first international contracts highlights this, as the company found itself working for FW de Klerk, who was running against Nelson Mandela in a post-Apartheid South Africa. The National Party, to whom Bell Pottinger was working for, was championing neoliberalism as its main solution to economic crises. This came to no surprise, as the National Party was mainly made up of figures from the Apartheid state, who had adopted these policies in the 1980s due to its close connections to the United Kingdom, United States, and World Bank, who were all advocating for neoliberal policies.³⁴

FW de Klerk represented a status quo that had existed before the fall of Apartheid. It has been argued that neoliberalism has deep historical roots within South Africa. The political crisis of 1976 saw South Africa's Apartheid government in crisis, with it quickly becoming apparent that reforms were needed for elites to maintain their power. In response to this, government-aligned economists began to use the writings of neoliberal thinkers such as Hayek for their own policies in an effort to legitimize their minority rule.³⁵ This crisis was joined by the global finance crisis of the 70s, which resulted in the South African government borrowing a great amount of money that grew considerable public ire into the 1980s. UK economists were among those who criticized South Africa's borrowing of funds, criticizing public corporations as bad economics.³⁶ Margaret Thatcher, a key ally to Bell Pottinger, was often a reliable although critical ally of the Apartheid government, holding off from imposing sanctions on the South African government in a time where her opponents were calling for such measures to take place.³⁷ The 1980s saw Apartheid political elites increasingly favoring neoliberal policies to solve their political issues. The Ministerial Committee for Privatization and Deregulation was created to oversee a reformation of South Africa's public corporations. It was headed by Wim de Villiers, a man who loudly criticized the post-war welfare state as "Post-War socialism."³⁸ All in all, the Apartheid government favored neoliberal solutions post-1970s. Apartheid needed neoliberalism to extend its lifeline, because it needed economic policies that weakened the bargaining power of its (mostly African) working class and boosted the power of its (White) ruling class.

Bell Pottinger's PR campaign for South Africa's first democratic election was one of its first major contracts outside of the UK, and its connections with South Africa would continue through the existence of the firm. The election involved FW de Klerk running against Nelson Mandela for president. This PR campaign involved films which cast doubts on the results of the 1994 election, suggesting that the National Party's percentage of the vote was not actually its real percentage but part of an agreement by ruling powers. This placed a lot of focus on the potential corruption of the National Party's political opponents, designed to hurt their political legitimacy. It also focused on black-on-black violence between the ANC and Inkatha Freedom Party, with the goal being to split and create fear within their respective voting bases. This strategy was two-fold: it sought to create wedges within the National Party's political foes while also painting its enemies as violent to their own supporters.³⁹ Ultimately, de Klerk would not win the 1994 election.

³⁴ Narsiah, Sagie. "Neoliberalism and Privatisation in South Africa." *GeoJournal* 57. Page 33.

³⁵ Schnitzler, *Democracy's Infrastructure*, 53.

³⁶ Marvin and Graham, *Splintering networks*, Olivier Coutard, *The Governance of Large Technical Systems* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 151.

³⁷ O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*, 399.

³⁸ "De Villiers Wants to Make Capital Work," *Business Day*, March 14, 1989.

³⁹ Kemp, G. (2020, August 9). *Doccie Dives into Bell Pottinger PR Nightmares*. Citypress.

While the National Party was defeated, this would not be the defeat of neoliberalism in South Africa. Its very nature meant that Mandela would simply inherit a government that had already given away much of its political power to economic elites, the very same economic elites whom had been in power in Apartheid were here to stay. Ultimately, it could be argued that it would be difficult for anything to truly change, even after the end of Apartheid. Apartheid had already created inequalities based on race, and unless those inequalities were fixed through direct action after Apartheid, they would remain. Looking at it this way, it can be easy to see claim that the privatization process described above was more of an exit strategy for the Apartheid government than anything, an exit strategy intended to maintain the majority of the prior status quo. The United States, United Kingdom, and many global financial institutions were practicing privatization at the time. By practicing privatization as well, the National Party elites enacting these privatization strategies began to build alliances with elites from the larger neoliberal power structure. By enacting these policies and further embedding South Africa in a larger global corporate power structure, these elites created a dependency that would make it difficult for substantial reforms to take place to reform South Africa's inequalities.⁴⁰

The techniques that Bell Pottinger used in the election were similar to what they had done with Thatcher. They did not just create products for the National Party and de Klerk, they advised de Klerk on how to speak and present his political ideas. They had even dressed de Klerk in traditional African clothes in an effort to win over voters. In a similar manner to how Thatcher was advised towards coming across as a powerful leader who could keep "socialist leftists" in check, de Klerk and the National Party were depicted as rational men who would prevent the ANC from taking any "radical" steps once taking power. Bell Pottinger understood that the National Party could not get more votes than the ANC, so the goal was about positioning the status quo powers as rational figures looking out for South Africa's well-being, rather than the holdovers from a cruel and racist regime. Particularly, a focus in their speeches were aimed at the importance of the National Party in creating South Africa's new constitution. In addition, a great amount of political violence was still transpiring within the nation. Bell Pottinger worked with the media in South Africa to depict this violence as evidence of the potential chaos that could ensue alongside a transition of political power. This violence was constructed to paint a negative image of the changes going through South Africa at the time, depicting the ANC's rise and the end of Apartheid as the beginning of a great rise of black violence. Of course, this campaign was being made to advance the political status of the National Party, which would be projected as the "strongman" leaders who would play the protector in this narrative. The National Party would be the ones pulling back from any scary reforms the ANC wanted to make to prevent any further chaos. Through depicting the explicit political violence that was taking place at the time, Bell Pottinger could leverage support for the National Party's message of being "rational political figures against radicalism." Bell Pottinger's PR campaign focused on calling upon voters to vote for the National Party to undercut "radicals" and depicted the ANC as communists.⁴¹

This campaign was one of the first of its nature for Bell Pottinger. The company saw itself as an agent capable of shaping the reputations of its clients. Even when dealing with overt political actors, it saw its goal as "enhancing their "clients" brand and deliver(ing) commercial success."

⁴⁰ Narsiah, Sagie. "Neoliberalism and privatisation in South Africa." Page 6.

⁴¹ Influence: 27:20 to 35:00.

According to Bell Pottinger itself, they had eight rules for managing crises: Do not panic, work out a plan, avoid blame; but take responsibility, accept help; but never lose control, manage expectations, be there and be available, be as transparent as possible, and understand your media and audience.⁴² While many of these statements are clearly insincere, it illustrates Bell Pottinger's cold, analytical approach to politics. While the National Party did not win the majority of the vote, Bell Pottinger's support was still central to the party gaining 20% of the vote. This gave the National Party the 2nd most amount of the votes in South Africa's first post-apartheid election. This allowed the National Party to remain influential during the formative years of South Africa's democracy while the ANC did not have the 2/3rds of the vote they needed to rewrite the constitution. According to South African journalist Diana Neille, "It had massive implications for South Africa," speaking on how Bell Pottinger helped the National Party influence South Africa's new constitution. The new constitution was very protective over the ownership of property and land rights, the biggest concern for the white-ruling class during the Apartheid government. This constitution allowed for the same elites from apartheid to maintain economic control.⁴³

The firm had managed to use fear to drum up support for the National Party by depicting violence between the ANC and Inkatha Freedom Party. This played upon the anxieties of certain elements of the voting base of South Africa. There is no doubt Bell Pottinger was creating a narrative that the fall of Apartheid would bring about political violence from those who had managed to overturn it, in hopes of garnering voters who would believe that support for the National Party would help stabilize this perceived chaos. While they did not manage to overcome Nelson Mandela in the election, that was never the goal. Mandela was too popular. All Bell Pottinger needed to do, however, was help de Klerk gather just enough support to ensure the National Party had a seat at the table. This way, it could fight for the policies it needed to back up South Africa's existing economic elites. While it is easy to dismiss Bell Pottinger's support of the National Party in 1994 as nothing more than a footnote building towards a larger campaign in 2017, it is important to note here that Bell Pottinger's work for de Klerk was part of why it had the influence to win another contract in South Africa in the first place. Bell Pottinger's work in helping the National Party secure votes to eventually influence land rights in the country cannot be understated. Here lies the use of such tools as Bell Pottinger, who successfully managed to manifest an air of anxiety among the National Party's political base. Because the ANC could not secure the 2/3rds needed to make the substantial reforms it needed to make to South Africa's constitution, it was inevitable that the ANC would need to adopt neoliberal policies to be successful within its status quo. We can see this through cases such as the ANC's more socialist-leaning Reconstruction and Development Plan transforming into a far more liberal Growth Employment and Redistribution policy.⁴⁴ The truth of the matter was that the ANC had to act within the institutions that it was operating within as a political party. These institutions had been reformed throughout the 70s and 80s by the Apartheid government as it privatized. Many of the inequalities perpetuated had become systemic, and the ANC could not help but be influenced by the discourse and institutions already embedded into South Africa by this process.⁴⁵

⁴² Mance, H. (2014). Lord Bell's textbook for old school public relations, Financial Times October 9, 2014.

⁴³ Shoba, Sandisiwe. "Encounters Film Festival: Bell Pottinger Exposed: Influence Unpacks the Evils of Disinformation." Daily Maverick.

⁴⁴ Narsiah, Sagie. "Neoliberalism and privatisation in South Africa." Page 3.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Page 13.

Bell Pottinger would return to South Africa throughout its existence, with the country being one of its first and last international contracts. The company's work in South Africa showcases Bell Pottinger's commitment as an enforcer of the neoliberal ideology abroad. This was not a company content with championing neoliberalism at home. The South Africa case showcases the establishment of the relationship between Bell Pottinger and neoliberal autocrats whose power is reinforced by larger neoliberal nations such as the United Kingdom and United States. Bell Pottinger would return to South Africa in favor of the ANC in 2016, ironically, a show of how far the ANC had endeared itself into a system it had previously been hostile to in the past. Aligning with the wealthy-billionaire Gupta family and ANC president Zuma, Bell Pottinger ran a social media campaign stoking anger over "white monopoly capital" and "economic apartheid" in order to distract from the corrupt practices of the Gupta family, who had used its ties with Jacob Zuma to extract billions out of the state.⁴⁶

Bell Pottinger in Iraq: Political Shock & Neoliberal Regime Building

In *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein argues that after nations are shocked by wars or other political crises, they are then shocked by corporations and aligned politicians who exploit the vulnerabilities left by the crises to implement "economic shock therapy." If, after this process, there is still resistance, they are then again "shocked," albeit this time by police, prisons, and other autocratic tools.⁴⁷ This is dubbed the "shock doctrine" by Klein, who argues in her book that the case of the Iraq War is one of the most comprehensive implementations of the practice. The 2003 invasion of Iraq and its subsequent occupation saw the privatization of state-owned enterprises, which included thousands being laid off, which then contributed to insurgency and greater political turmoil. The post-occupation Iraqi government, initially under the direction of a Coalition Provisional Authority established by the United States, had a bottom-line that favored insiders and economic elites.⁴⁸ The profits international businesses made from contracts related to the occupation of Iraq are well documented, including UK-based private firms. Corpwatch reports that at least 61 British Companies accumulated at least £1.1 billion on contracts and investments in the new Iraq.⁴⁹ The case of Iraq sees Bell Pottinger champion neoliberalism once again; this time amassed by a small army of corporate actors all seeking to expand their businesses. As described prior, a key element of neoliberalism is the expansion of capital investment into new markets. The occupation of Iraq was a major opportunity to do so. The nation saw this happen through an economy of homeland security, privatized war, and failed reconstruction, which only led to the foundation of a privatized police state.⁵⁰

The 2003 invasion of Iraq effectively dismantled the nation's status quo as it found its economic and political paradigms shifted. The nation was integrated into the global markets through the use of neoliberal legal frameworks and laws that trans-nationalized the Iraqi state, utilizing it to

⁴⁶ Neate, Rupert. "Bell Pottinger faces hearing over claims it stirred racial tension in South Africa." *The Guardian*.

⁴⁷ Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Pages 25-26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Page 381.

⁴⁹ Verkaik, R. (2006, March 13). IRAQ: British Companies Making a Fortune out of Iraq Conflict. CorpWatch.

⁵⁰ Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Page 299.

effectively create new means of transnational capital from the nation. The new laws imposed by the U.S. occupation opened the nation to global investors regardless of their international origins, showcasing that the invasion of Iraq often served transnational business interests.⁵¹

The U.S. Defense Department awarded Bell Pottinger one of its largest contracts, which paid the firm at least \$540 million between 2004 and 2011. This placed Bell Pottinger at the center of the United States “psy-ops” efforts in the midst of its War on Terror.⁵² On the eve of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, political commentator Michael Ignatieff described the United States’ global efforts as “an empire lite, a global hegemony whose grace notes are free markets, human rights, and democracy, enforced by the most awesome military power that the world has ever known.”⁵³ These words best describe America’s mindset heading into the Iraq War and the War on Terror as a whole. The United States’ actions in the Middle East best represented the nation’s ambitions in the absence of any challenges on the global stage. The USSR had fallen, and China, while seen as a threat, was not viewed in the way it would become in the 2010s. The United States’ efforts in Iraq, regardless of what motivations one may argue were behind it, clearly involved liberalizing the state. This meant neoliberal policies: A democratic state that looked more like the US, and especially a free and open economy. This fit in with Bell Pottinger’s modus operandi thus far, and so it would come to no surprise that the PR firm would be hired to assist the United States in its efforts in Iraq. There was money to be made, and British companies such as Bell Pottinger made a fortune from the occupation of Iraq.

Bell Pottinger’s efforts in Iraq were vast and complicated. To meet the conditions of their Pentagon paymasters, all content was signed off by the then-commander of Iraq’s coalition forces, General David Petraeus. Bell Pottinger was said to have worked directly with military forces in Camp Victory, Baghdad. They reported directly to The Pentagon, CIA, and National Security Council. The work the firm had done was unlike anything it had done before, and clearly a huge step forward for the scope of Bell Pottinger’s actions. It is why the case of Bell Pottinger in Iraq represents a clear point of transformation that would shape the modern disinformation firm of the 2010s. Being paid over a hundred million dollars a year, and employing at least 300 British and Iraqi staff, this was a huge campaign. In 2004, it was tasked by Iraq’s temporary administration to promote democratic elections in the country.

During its tenure in Iraq, Bell Pottinger’s contractual assignments from 2007 to 2011 are significant in helping to pioneer techniques that would later be more widely used by modern disinformation firms. According to Martin Wells, a video editor working for Bell Pottinger during this time, the company engaged in a systematic disinformation campaign that produced three related public relations products. The first products were television commercials meant to depict Al Qaeda in a negative light. The second products would be news items meant to look as if they had come from Arabic TV. This involved using low-definition cameras to apparently film bombings, although the exact source of the footage is unclear. These first two products were

⁵¹ Baker, Yousef K. "Global Capitalism and Iraq: The Making of a Neoliberal State." *International Review of Modern Sociology*. Page 121.

⁵² Gaffey, C. (2017, September 13). Assad, Pinochet and the Pentagon: Bell Pottinger's Most Controversial Clients. *Newsweek*.

⁵³ McCoy, Alfred W. *In The Shadows of The American Century: The Rise and Decline of US Global Power*. Kindle Edition. Page 43.

designed to be sent to TV stations all over the Middle East to paint the US military in a more positive light, with the fact that they were propaganda manufactured by the military itself often not being disclosed to viewers. What is clear is that the United States had also contracted the Lincoln Group around the same period to place Pentagon articles in Iraqi newspapers, framed as unbiased news. The technique of creating a piece of propaganda but disguising it to appear as if it came from a separate, more legitimate news source will be one that we will see repeated many times by successor disinformation firms.⁵⁴

The goal of these products was to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis and other regional citizens for the occupational forces in the same way “Labour Isn’t Working” won the hearts and minds of British voters. “I was really dead set on going to Iraq and I wanted to do it in the space of countering the extremism on the ground of giving the new state a chance” said Kirsten Fontenrose, Strategy Consultant of the Multinational Forces in Iraq. “It was not naïve in the beginning to bring in marketing expertise (...) who does it better? Who’s ever done it before at all?” She spoke when speaking on her rationale behind bringing in experts from firms such as Bell Pottinger. These products were sensational and contained shocking imagery. One such TV spot created for Iraqi citizens involved a lone Iraqi woman watching over a newborn baby, presumably her child, humming Iraq’s national anthem. Other spots included scenes of violence, including imagery of men using firearms to gun others down to depict the chaos that insurgents had created within the nation. Another spot involved a middle-aged Iraqi woman crying over a small casket, presumably a child. A soap opera-like program was produced in which a young man from an Iraqi family falls into the wrong crowd and is recruited by Al-Qaeda, ending in tragedy. Supposedly, at least 13 of these products were created a month for use as propaganda pieces by the occupational forces. Looking at the kinds of products Bell Pottinger made, they were clearly interested in both nation building and combating support for insurgents in Iraq. These products were created by non-Iraqis, funded by the US government, and focused on cultivating Iraqi nationalism, support for occupational forces, and swaying support for insurgencies.⁵⁵

Fabricated Al Qaeda propaganda films were produced. Martin Wells was given exact instructions for how to construct these films to appear as legitimate as possible. They had to look and feel like real Al Qaeda propaganda films, even being encoded in the same way as if they were being produced by Al Qaeda itself. Reportedly, US forces were told to drop these films as CDs in the middle of scenes of chaos, often in the aftermath of violence so that they may be picked up and watched afterwards by insurgents. The CDs were meant to be played on Real Player, a media streaming application connected to the internet that allowed for the United States to collect IP addresses of where the video was played. The point was to track the locations of insurgents using these IP addresses. In doing so, Bell Pottinger did not just act as propagandists, they literally assisted the US military in tracking and killing Iraqi insurgents during the occupation. Through this act, the US government could even tell if these CDs were circulated outside of Iraq. Although multiple PR firms were utilized by the United States within this period, including Leonie Industries and the aforementioned Lincoln Group, Bell Pottinger’s contract would be the most lucrative.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Black, A. F.-S. and C. (2016, October 2). Fake News and False Flags. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

⁵⁵ Influence The Film. “INFLUENCE: Cut scene | Bell Pottinger goes to war in Iraq”

⁵⁶ Black, A. F.-S. and C. (2016, October 2). Fake News and False Flags. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

In many ways, nothing that has been described about Bell Pottinger's operations thus far is particularly new. This could arguably be true for any of the case studies, as propaganda has existed as long as politics have. Most of the techniques described above have appeared in the Cold War, the World Wars, and other conflicts long before these. Regardless, Bell Pottinger's work in Iraq remains important for two reasons: First, it represented Bell Pottinger's growing prestige and the acknowledgement of its high position in promoting neoliberal policies on a global stage. Second, we saw the first uses of the internet in their product. Although not entirely relevant in terms of content, and the use of the internet to track IP addresses is likely The Pentagon's idea rather than Bell Pottinger's, we can see the start of the internet's importance here. The influence of which will eventually become vital to the scope and power of disinformation firms.

Bell Pottinger's Promotion of Neoliberalism Pre-Arab Spring: Support for Tourism, Arms Manufacturing, & Autocrats

South Africa and Iraq were only two major contracts Bell Pottinger had during the 1990s and 2000s. However, there were many more operations of lesser scale that the firm undertook in this time period which shared similar features with their contracts in South Africa and Iraq. The company worked with autocrats such as Pinochet, the Al-Assad Family, Shinawatra in Thailand, and the supposed "last dictator of Europe," Lukashenko of Belarus. These contracts are similar in nature to the contractual work in South Africa in showcasing a pattern of behavior in which Bell Pottinger takes contracts from autocrats who either already have ties with neoliberal superpowers or are showing a willingness to adopt neoliberalism in order to reconsolidate their power. Meanwhile, contracts with the Kirchners in Argentina and BAE show Bell Pottinger's willingness to promote international business, even in the face of controversy. Bell Pottinger's contracts with the Kirchner family and BAE saw the company promoting the arms manufacturing and international tourism industries, respectively, even as both their clients were highly criticized for their practices.

The history of the firm's relationship with autocrats is highlighted by their defense of Augusto Pinochet when he was detained in Spain in 1998. Pinochet's regime in Chile had close ties with imperial powers such as the United States since its inception, when it paved the way for the adoption of neoliberal policies long before the days of Reaganism or Thatcherism. Therefore the fact that Bell Pottinger was willing to defend Pinochet's legacy should come as no surprise.⁵⁷ Tim Bell had actually done work with associates of Pinochet before, as he had actually helped run a campaign for Hernan Buchi, Pinochet's successor, during Chile's 1989 elections as it was transitioning away from dictatorship, the campaign being similar in nature to Bell Pottinger's work for de Klerk.⁵⁸ Upon being hired, Bell Pottinger created the "Chile reconciliation" website in defense of their new client, whom had been arrested in Spain for the actions of his regime in Chile. The narratives used by Bell Pottinger and other actors organized by the Pinochet Foundation painted Pinochet's detainment and the reports of the cruelty of his regime as one

⁵⁷ "The Pinochet Dictatorship: Military Rule and Neoliberal Economics." In *The Chile Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Page 438.

⁵⁸ *Influence*: 23:23 to 24:07.

created by “Marxists” who wished to destroy Pinochet and his legacy for their own economic agenda, not through any sense of justice. Numerous narratives were constructed in the Pinochet Foundation’s efforts to defend its founder. A pamphlet was circulated arguing that while Pinochet’s police may have committed atrocities, there was no concrete proof that Pinochet himself was involved. It was also argued that the real reason the Spanish courts made an extradition request was because they were being masterminded by Joan Garces, a former political advisor to Salvador Allende, the president that Pinochet had overthrown.⁵⁹

Bell Pottinger was then hired by the wife of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad in 2006. Reportedly, Asma Al-Assad wanted Bell Pottinger to grow her public profile in the same vein as the first ladies of other world leaders. Bell Pottinger did not work directly for her but did advise Asma on how to portray her own international image and set up her own communications office. Following Bell Pottinger’s advice, favorable coverage of Asma Al-Assad began to increase. It chose to create some distance from itself and the Syrian dictatorship in this case but was still willing to share its expertise for the right price. A 2011 Vogue article on Syria’s first lady referred to Syria’s ruling family as “wildly democratic.” Although Bell Pottinger kept the Al-Assad regime at arm’s length, it is clear that Syria’s first lady attempted to use Bell Pottinger’s advice for navigating the west’s media landscape to build a positive reputation for herself. The Vogue article being a clear case of this.⁶⁰

The firm also had a contract in Belarus in 2007. Bell Pottinger’s work in Belarus focused on shifting Belarus’ image over to one that would benefit a greater transition to neoliberalism under infamous despot Lukashenko. The plan was to promote Belarus as a nation that could be attractive for international investment as an alternative to Russian support in the nation.⁶¹ The 2007-2011 period would actually see Bell Pottinger taking on even more controversial clients. This included Thaksin Shinawatra, former Prime Minister of Thailand, who contracted Bell Pottinger to build his reputation after he bought the Manchester City Football Club.⁶² Thaksin Shinawatra was ousted in a military coup in 2006, and was controversial, accused of both corruption and abuse of power before being removed from office. Shinawatra was also a champion of neoliberal politics before being ousted, seeking to open Thailand to international business.⁶³

In 2003, BAE Systems, the United Kingdom’s largest defense company, hired Bell Pottinger to improve its public relations.⁶⁴ BAE Systems is one of the world’s top arms producers, generating sales of about \$20 billion a year. It has a unique relationship with The Pentagon, which treats the company as a domestic arms contractor. BAE systems has repeatedly been accused of corruption, polluting the environment, and selling arms to autocratic states. Bell Pottinger’s work was primarily focused in counteracting the controversy BAE often finds itself garnering. The

⁵⁹ Honigsbaum, M. (1999, January 24). Pinochet Groupies Fly in to Combat 'Vendetta' Against Their Hero. The Guardian.

⁶⁰ Gaffey, C. (2017, September 13). Assad, Pinochet and the Pentagon: Bell Pottinger's Most Controversial Clients. Newsweek.

⁶¹ Meduza. (2020, September 10). Guys, get out: How British spin-doctors and Boris Berezovsky tried to help Alexander Lukashenko win over the West. Meduza.

⁶² Holmes, P. (2014, October 24). Bell Pottinger to Represent Controversial Man City Owner. PRovoke.

⁶³ Hewison, Kevin. "Thaksin Shinawatra and the reshaping of Thai politics." Contemporary Politics. Page 121.

⁶⁴ Freeman, G. BAE Hires Bell Pottinger Following Press Attacks. PR Week.

company has sold arms to Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Zaire, and Tanzania, sales that would be impossible without the sanctioning of the United Kingdom. British Conservative leaders such as Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher, and John Major were major supporters of the company, and of the arms industry in general.⁶⁵ In 2009, under the controversial Kirchner government, Bell Pottinger would be hired to improve Argentina's image to make it attractive for international tourism and foreign investment using similar strategies to the Belarus case.⁶⁶ After the death of Hugo Chavez, Bell Pottinger briefly fought to improve the image of Venezuelan energy firms Trafigura and Cuadrilla in order to make them attractive for international investment, despite both being tied to the authoritarian Chavez regime. Bell Pottinger argued that the market would naturally set the moral standards for the behavior of corporate entities.⁶⁷

In each of these cases, we can see Bell Pottinger acting as an operative for the greater international market, even if it means operating with authoritarian actors. In some cases, such as with the Al-Assad Family, we can see how great wealth can be leveraged to acquire their services. With companies such as BAE, we see Bell Pottinger acting as a defensive agent to protect the right of a large corporate entity to act without any regulation from the public or government. The biggest pattern between them, however, as can be seen in Thailand, Argentina, Belarus, Chile, Syria, and Chile, is that autocrats will align themselves with neoliberal policies, or even just flirt with the idea of privatizing public assets, paths that would establish relationships with a firm such as Bell Pottinger, who would then attempt to shape the public perception of them into something more favorable. This allows for autocrats to essentially form alliances with wealthy elites to secure greater power and support, at the expense of democracy itself in many cases.

Conclusion

Bell Pottinger arose in British politics just when it was needed and was used as a tool to aggressively promote new neoliberal policies. Its main purpose was to normalize neoliberal policies as a means of solving political crises while simultaneously dispelling competing solutions as corrupt and inefficient. Without these firms as a conduit for neoliberalism, political actors dependent on such messaging may not have been able to communicate their policies effectively to their audiences. The pattern of operations Bell Pottinger followed strike eerily similar to digital "fake news" firms that operate on social media such as Cambridge Analytica, with the two companies actually operating similarly in the same timeframe for a small period. South Africa and Iraq shows the extent to which Bell Pottinger was employed to lead disinformation campaigns. In both cases the firm advanced the objectives of powerful imperial powers as a means of asserting neoliberalism abroad, namely by supporting autocratic leaders in their efforts to manipulate public opinion. As seen by their contracts with Pinochet, the Al-Assad family, Shinawatra, Lukashenko, Kirchner, and BAE, the cases of South Africa and Iraq are not isolated cases but rather significant examples of the kind of work Bell Pottinger did.

⁶⁵ Lilley, S., Chatterjee, P. C., Fox, T. (2003, November 11). BAE System's Dirty Dealings. CorpWatch.

⁶⁶ Echeverri Cañas, Lina María, and Christian A. Estay-Niculcar. "The Role of Tourism in The Country Brand Consolidation of Argentina." *Revista Científica* "Visión de Futuro." Page 206.

⁶⁷ Sloan, Alistair. "Bell Pottinger got what it deserved." Aljazeera.

In almost none of these cases was the truth or even any kind of political transparency even considered. In South Africa, Bell Pottinger relied on disinformation to portray political opponents as violent and radical. In Iraq, they were willing to proliferate fake media for use by Iraqi insurgents and produced propaganda for the US military. In Spain, Syria, Thailand, and Belarus, they transparently attempted to rewrite history to sugarcoat the violent atrocities, human rights violations and ulterior motives of some of the worlds' most infamous autocrats. They promoted tourism in Argentina for the Kirchners and defended BAE Systems' business practices, despite both clients being under harsh scrutiny for corrupt practices. All of this happened before social media really took any kind of grip on modern society. If anything, the examples of this case showcase that the disinformation firm has existed long before the age of Facebook fake news.

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