Propaganda in the Reformation

(From Wikipedia)

Protestant propaganda and church doctrine broke away from the traditional conventions of the Catholic Church. They called for a change in the way that the church was run and insisted that the buying and selling of indulgences and religious positions be stopped as well as the papal corruption that had been allowed to occur. In addition to this, Reformers questioned the authority of the Church and in particular the Pope. Protestants believed that the main authority of their church should be the Gospel or Scripture (expounded by private interpretation) and not the Pope, who is the earthly head of the Catholic Church.

Another dominant message that was found in Protestant propaganda was the idea that every person should be granted access to the Bible to interpret it for themselves; this was the primary reason why Luther translated and published numerous copies of the New Testament during the Reformation years. Protestants questioned the belief that the Pope had the sole authority to interpret scripture. This can be seen in Luther’s publication titled To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, which criticized the Catholic belief that the Pope was supreme and could interpret scripture however he saw fit. To combat this, Luther put forth arguments from the Bible that indicated that everyone had the ability to interpret scripture and not just the Pope.

The Reformation messages were very controversial and were frequently banned in a number of Catholic cities. Despite this attempt by the Catholic Church, to contain and repress Protestant propaganda, the Protestant propagandists found effective ways of disseminating their messages to their believers. The use of pamphlets became the primary method of spreading Protestant ideas and doctrine. Pamphlets took little time to produce and they could be printed and sold quickly making them harder to track down by the authorities and thus making them a very effective method of propaganda. The sheer number of pamphlets produced during this time period indicates that Protestant works during the Reformation were available on a consistent basis and on a large scale, making the controversial ideas accessible to the masses. This is one of the reasons that the Protestants were successful in their propaganda campaign and in the Reformation.

The dissension of the Reformers was not welcomed by Roman Catholics who called this behaviour and the works of the Protestant Propagandists heretical. They disagreed with the Protestant Reformers and the messages that they were presenting to the public, the majority of Roman Catholics believed that matters of the Church should not be discussed
with lay people, but kept behind closed doors. The majority of the works published by Roman Catholics during the Reformation attempted to dispel these ideas and restore the Roman Catholic faith.

The Roman Catholic propagandists were very reactive with their works. On a number of occasions they would refute Luther’s and other Protestants’ arguments after they had been published as opposed to printing and publishing proactive works. An example of a reactive propaganda campaign publicized by Roman Catholics was with regards to the Peasants War of 1525. The propagandists blamed the Peasants War, and all the turmoil caused by it, on Luther. Many leading Roman Catholic writers believed that, had Luther not written his heretical works, the violence caused by the Peasants War would not have occurred.

The Roman Catholic Propagandists attempted to turn Luther’s words around to demonstrate how Luther’s ideas and writings were at fault for the Peasants War. This can be seen in Hieronymus Emser’s work titled *Answer to Luther’s “Abomination” Against the Holy Secret Prayer of the Mass, Also How, Where, and With Which Words Luther Urged, Wrote, and promoted Rebellion in his Books* published in Dresden in 1525. Emser actually quoted Luther’s work in this article and in doing so, he inadvertently contributed to the Protestant propaganda campaign. By quoting Luther’s work, Emser and other Roman Catholic propagandists introduced Protestant ideas and doctrine to Roman Catholic readers who may not have had any prior exposure to them. This indicates that this method of propaganda was not the most effective, and may have actually led to the spread of Protestant propaganda as opposed to the suppression of it.

Unlike the Protestants who targeted the masses through printed works in the vernacular of the people, Roman Catholic propagandists targeted a different group of people; they aimed to have their literature and propaganda read by influential people, such as priests, who could preach to their congregations on a weekly basis. In this sense the Roman Catholic propagandists were able to produce fewer works but still have their message reach a large percentage of people through oral communication within the churches and the community. Although the Roman Catholic propagandists were reaching a large percentage of people with their works, so too were the Protestant propagandists who relied not only on dissemination through oral communication, but also through printed texts which spread the Reformation message.

Although the Roman Catholic propagandists did put forth some effective propaganda campaigns, primary the campaign against Luther regarding the Peasants War, they neglected to get their message across to the general public. They failed to capitalize in the ways that the Protestant propagandists were able to; they did not commonly produce
works in the vernacular of the people, which had been an effective tactic used by the
Protestants. Another factor which indicates that the Roman Catholic propagandists were
not as effective as the Protestant propagandists was the lack of publications, either in
German or Latin, produced during the reformation years. The Protestant publications
greatly outnumbered the Roman Catholic publications. This is a significant factor because
the sheer volume of publications made it impossible for the Roman Catholic
propagandists to quell the Protestant ideas and doctrine allowing the Reformation, and
Protestant propaganda to be successful in transforming religious thought and doctrine in
the sixteenth century.

There were a number of Protestant reformers who played a role in the success of
Protestant propaganda, such as Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, Urbanus Rhegius and
Philipp Melanchthon. The single most influential person was Martin Luther. Luther wrote
much more than any other leading reformer, and the majority of his works were in the
German vernacular. It is estimated that Luther's works had over 2200 printings (with
re-printings) by 1530, and he continued to write until the time of his death in 1546.

Luther's use of the language of the people was one of the primary ideas of the
Reformation. He believed in the ‘Priesthood of All Believers’, that every person was a
priest in their own right and could take control of their own faith. Of the total lifetime
printings of Luther, estimated to be around 3183, 2645 were written in German and only
538 in Latin. Luther's predominance meant that the Protestant propaganda campaign was
cohesive, with a consistent and accessible message.

Luther produced other works: sermons, which were read in Churches around the Empire;
translations of the Bible, primarily the New Testament written in German; doctrine on
how to conduct oneself within the church and society and a multitude of letters and
treatises. Often Luther wrote in response to others who had criticized his works or asked
for clarification or justification on an issue. Three of Luther’s major treatises, written in
1520, are To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, On the Freedom of a Christian
and On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church; these works were significant documents
for the Reformation as a whole.

Catholic propagandists were not initially as successful as the Protestants were, but
included several noteworthy figures: Johannes Cochlaeus, Hieronymus Emser, Georg
Witzel and John Eck, who wrote in defense of Catholicism, and against Luther and
Protestantism. They produced a combined total of 247 works.