

The Spectacle of Propaganda: Allan Fisher's Photography and USIS Operations in Brazil

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The Spectacle of Propaganda explores the power of visual media in shaping public perception during the Cold War. The project focused on a previously unseen archive of photographs taken by Allan Fisher, a US photographer hired by the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), and later by the US State Department to work in Brazil between 1942 and 1955. Led by Dr Daniel Mandur Thomaz, the project digitised, contextualised, and publicly disseminated a selection of these striking images, which capture mobile propaganda campaigns targeting Brazilian schools, factories, and rural communities.

Working in close collaboration with Dr Thais Blank and Dr Martina Spohr of the Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV CPDOC) in Rio de Janeiro, the team launched a bilingual (English-Portuguese) website showcasing the material and hosted two workshops for Brazilian public-school teachers. These workshops encouraged participants to engage critically with historical and contemporary propaganda, using the photographs as a tool to reflect on ideological influence, political messaging, and the enduring legacies of Cold War communication strategies.

The project contributed to a more nuanced understanding of propaganda, not as simple fabrication, but as a complex, culturally embedded practice of persuasion. It also strengthened institutional links between King's College London and FGV CPDOC, laying the groundwork for future collaborative research while equipping educators with new resources to promote media literacy and critical historical thinking in the classroom.

HOW DID THE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

The project grew out of Daniel's research into Cold War propaganda in Brazil. During this work, he gained access to a private archive of unpublished photographs by Allan Fisher, a US photographer who became an officer of the United States Information Service (USIS) in the 1940s. Fisher's work from this period, which spanned from 1945 to 1955, documented US-sponsored efforts to influence Brazilian public opinion through film screenings and other visual media. His photographs document mobile propaganda campaigns across Brazilian schools, factories, and rural areas, offering a rare glimpse into how ideological messaging was delivered and received.

Recognising the historical significance of this largely unseen collection, Daniel partnered with Thais Blank and Martina Spohr at Fundação Getúlio Vargas – CPDOC, whose experience in visual culture and public outreach made them ideal collaborators. Together, they developed a bilingual online archive and a public workshop for Brazilian teachers, building on CPDOC's existing initiative, *Historical Sources in the Classroom*. This collaboration brought new historical sources to light while forging stronger academic links between King's College London and Brazilian institutions.



Allan Fisher's notes: "Escola Joaquim in Botafogo. This school is a year old and has an attendance of 650 children, mainly from poor families."



Workers at Fábrica Fundição Nacional, where USIE (United States Information Exchange) films were shown weekly.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The project began with the digitisation and curation of a selection of unexplored photographs taken by US photographer Allan Fisher. Taken in Brazil between 1945 and 1955, the images capture US propaganda operations delivered via mobile film units in schools, factories, and remote rural communities. These previously unpublished photographs were organised into thematic series and made available to the public through a bilingual WordPress website (see further reading).

In collaboration with Dr Thais Blank and Dr Martina Spohr at FGV CPDOC, the team ran a two-day workshop on 28 November 2024 for public school history teachers in Rio de Janeiro. The workshop introduced the teachers to the concept of "propaganda-spectacle" and supported them in creating classroom activities linking Cold War media campaigns to contemporary discussions about disinformation and perception management. Despite a water crisis in Rio that forced school closures, the workshop was highly engaging, with long Q&A sessions and enthusiastic responses.

A second hybrid (in-person and online) workshop was planned for 17 March 2025 to widen participation. Teachers were asked to complete surveys before and after the workshop, and those who attended developed classroom activity plans using materials from the project website.



USIE Film screening and talk on the Korean War at Brahma brewery. Workers received free beer and a U.N.-themed documentary.

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

The project gave public school teachers in Brazil new tools and insights to explore how propaganda work, both historically and in the present day. Many of the teachers said the workshops changed the way they understood Cold War propaganda, shifting their focus from modern advertising or political marketing to the broader role that visual media plays in shaping public opinion.

Before the workshop, only a small number of participants associated the word “propaganda” with international conflicts or Cold War politics. Afterward, every participant said the discussions had changed how they thought about the subject, and that the historical examples would help them guide conversations about social media, disinformation, and political communication in their classrooms today. Several commented on how striking it was to see how these mid-20th-century campaigns echoed modern-day disinformation strategies, especially in online spaces. One participant reflected: *“These historical examples highlight how communication strategies can be used to strengthen ideological positions, influence social groups, and manipulate narratives in times of political polarisation.”*

Teachers not only learned from the material but also contributed to it—co-creating classroom activity plans using the archive. These plans will help students critically examine how information is presented to them, and how history can offer valuable case studies for understanding the media landscape they live in today. The project’s website, available in both English and Portuguese, ensures that this rare photographic archive is accessible not only to educators, but also to students, researchers, and the wider public. By connecting the past to the present, the project helped foster critical thinking about the power of images, the politics of information, and the importance of media literacy in a digital age.

Finally, the project also sparked new collaborations between King's College London and FGV CPDOC in Brazil, setting the stage for future international partnerships in research, teaching, and public engagement.

DANIEL'S TOP TIPS FOR IMPACT

1. Start the paperwork early

International collaborations bring a lot of value, but also a lot of bureaucracy. Begin the process of fund transfers, supplier registrations, and approvals as early as possible. Delays are common, and having extra time can save a lot of stress.

2. Explain what "impact" means, clearly and often

If you're working with partners outside the UK, take time to explain how "impact" is understood in the UK research context. It's not just about doing good work; it's about demonstrating change, gathering evidence, and showing how your project made a difference.

3. Think long-term from the start

Design your project as a pilot for future work. Build in opportunities for growth, new collaborations, and further funding bids. A good impact project doesn't just end; it opens doors.

FURTHER READING

- Explore the archive and learn more about the project:
<https://propagandaspectacle.kcl.ac.uk>



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Or visit: www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/research/impact