pite considerable competition from the Habsburgs, especially Philip IV). The most elaborate and self-conscious attempts at projecting a favourable image of the ruler were those made by a group of officials, artists and men of letters (or women of letters, notably Mademoiselle de Scudéry) in the reign of Louis XIV, especially in the period of his personal rule, which lasted for more than half a century (1661-1715), allowing historians to observe changes over the long term.

The official attention paid to the royal image makes it appropriate to analyse representations of Louis, as more recent propaganda has often been analysed, in terms of who says what to whom, through what channels and codes, in what settings and with what intentions and effects. The absence from their vocabulary of modern terms such as 'propaganda' or 'ideology' does not imply that viewers and listeners of this period were unaware of attempts at persuasion. Seventeenth-century schools paid a good deal of attention to rhetoric, while the place of the phrase 'public opinion' was taken by one of the king's favourite terms, 'glory'. The term 'propaganda' is all the more appropriate because the government was concerned not only to present the king in a heroic light but also to spread official interpretations of specific events of the reign.

To begin with the channels and codes, the media of the seventeenth century. The co-existence of traditional media with new ones and their constant interaction is a striking feature of the system. Among the traditional media, ritual surely takes pride of place, from the everyday rituals such as the royal lever, in which Louis was handed his clothes by leading noblemen, to special occasions like 'touching for the king's evil', practised since the Middle Ages and still performed by Louis two or three times a year. This was no mere survival, for as the great French historian Marc Bloch pointed out in the 1920s, the recorded numbers of sick people touched by kings of France actually increased in the seventeenth century. Louis touched as many as 2,000 sick people on occasion. Foreign visitors have left vivid descriptions of these rituals, snapshots of the court of the Sun King.

What these snapshots do not reveal, however, are the change that took place in the rituals over more than half a century. Louis is associated with Versailles, but he only made this palace his main residence in 1682. It is likely that his everyday life was increasingly ritualised in the course of the reign. Why? The traditional explanation is a
political one – that the upper nobility were encouraged, if not compelled, to come to court in order to cut them off from their local power bases. The court therefore had to be made glamorous. However, the historian should beware of too cynically utilitarian an interpretation of the system as if Louis and his advisers were standing outside it. It is extremely likely that they felt the glamour too.

Ritual is the oldest stratum in the archaeology of the royal image. In the second place comes architecture. The construction of magnificent buildings, especially palaces, as symbols of a new régime was traditional enough. However, Versailles was much grander than earlier French palaces, and it had a more complex iconography, centred on the sun. The Louvre was also rebuilt 'to make people respect the king and leave them with an impression of his power'. This phrase comes from a memorandum by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, a key document showing that the minister (who combined the posts of Superintendent of Finance and Superintendent of the King's Works) regarded architecture as a powerful means of impression management.

There was also a Renaissance stratum in the media available to Louis XIV. For example, the court ballet (the French equivalent to the Stuart masque) often carried a political message. Louis XIV used to dance in ballets in his younger days, especially in the role of Apollo, or the sun, wearing for the purpose a special golden wig. In the second place, there was the state portrait, a genre which had developed in the sixteenth century (from Holbein's Henry VIII to Titian's Charles V). It was normal for monarchs to commission a few such portraits. In the case of Louis XIV, however, some 300 have survived, suggesting unusual concern with his image. Indeed, the king must have spent a significant part of his life sitting to painters. Like Charles V, Louis also commissioned 'war artists' to follow him on campaign and record his achievements on the spot.

The free-standing statue was another Renaissance genre. Early modern rulers were frequently represented in this way, usually on horseback. What was new in the reign of Louis XIV was the scale of the operation. During what has been called the 'statue campaign' of the 1680s, a series of nearly twenty statues of the king, were commissioned for public squares in Paris (Place Louis-le-Grand, Place des Victoires) and in provincial towns; Aix, Angers, Arles, Besançon, Bordeaux, Caen, Dijon, Grenoble, Le Havre, Limoges, Lyons, Marseilles, Montpellier, Pau, Poitiers, Rennes, Tours and Troyes. Free-standing permanent triumphal arches were also erected in Paris and the provinces, for the first time since the decline of the Roman empire.

Particularly effective, however, was the official use of media which could be reproduced mechanically – tapestries (made at the state factory of the Gobelins); medals; and printed texts and images. Sixteenth-century rulers often issued twenty or thirty medals to commemorate the major events of their reigns, but Louis struck more than 300, telling what contemporaries called 'the story of the king' in bronze.

Print had also been exploited to some degree by Renaissance monarchs, but was used on a much grander scale by Louis XIV. For example, the visual image of the king was widely diffused.

Up In the gods – Noret depicts Louis and his family as deities on Mount Olympus in this de trop allegory of 1670.
A media event – Testelin’s ‘record’ of the setting up of the Academy of Sciences with Louis presiding, a visit which never in fact took place.

by means of engravings. About 700 different engravings of Louis have survived. The medals too were engraved and the engravings grouped into an official ‘medallic history’ of the reign. An official newspaper, the Gazette de France (founded in 1631) issued reports twice a week on the actions of the king. The government also commissioned poems in praise of Louis and histories of his reign, encouraging Racine to abandon the theatre, and Boileau poetry, in order to celebrate the king’s deeds in prose. Like the artists, Boileau and Racine were also invited to accompany Louis on campaign.

It is time to move from the media to the message. Of course the sheer size of Versailles, or some of the statues, was a message in itself, but there are more precise communications to be decoded. The visual image of the king was a stereotyped image, a kind of identikit Louis, and an image which was enhanced in the traditional manner. Louis was not a tall man, and the contrast between his physical height and what might be called his ‘social height’ was carefully camouflaged. Costume helped create the king (as Thackeray once demonstrated in a cruel cartoon). Seventeenth-century decorum did not allow ordinary clothes in representations of royalty, so Louis was portrayed in his coronation robes or in Roman armour (but wearing a modern wig). He might appear as a god, usually Apollo or Jupiter but occasionally as Neptune. In these images he is normally surrounded by dignified or dignity-giving properties such as curtains, columns, orb, sceptre, sword, chariot, and trophies. Female personifications of Victory and Fame frequently stand or hover nearby, while various human figures are represented in attitudes of submission – defeated enemies, cowering captives, and so on. Monsters are often trampled underfoot, the Hydra of heresies, for example, or the three-headed dog Cerberus, the heads in this case signifying the Triple Alliance of Louis’ enemies, the Empire, Britain and the Netherlands.

Louis was described by means of a standard list of epithets. He was (in English alphabetical order), august, conquering, enlightened, generous, god-given, heroic, illustrious, immortal, invincible, just, magnanimous, pious, triumphant and wise. In a word, he was ‘great’, an adjective officially adopted in 1671. Indeed, LOUIS LE GRAND was generally written in capital letters even in a text in lower case. Readers, viewers and listeners were also regularly informed that Louis was accessible to his subjects, the protector of arts and letters, the extinguisher of heresies, the restorer of the laws, the extender of the frontiers, the second founder of the state and the most powerful monarch of the universe.

In literature, as in the visual arts, the image of the king was associated with that of heroes from the past. Louis was variously presented as a new Augustus (finding Paris brick and leaving it marble), a new Alexander (the young king’s favourite comparison), a new Charlemagne, a new Constantine, a new St Louis. Apart from these mortals, the king was compared to Hercules, to Neptune, to Jupiter, and more especially to Apollo and the sun.

Such grandiose comparisons are not easy for historians from a twentieth-century democratic culture to swallow. It is easy – too easy – for us to dismiss them as empty formalities or to accuse their authors of servility. It is necessary to remember that panegyric of this kind was traditional (a classical tradition revived at the Renaissance), and also that the genre could be used (as it was on occasion by Boileau and Racine) to transmit other messages – to advise the king while appearing only to praise him.

It is also interesting to see the increasing use of new techniques of presentation, notably of statistics (‘political arithmetic’ as contemporaries called it). For example, a medal struck to commemorate the revocation of the edict of Nantes carries the inscription. Vicies Contena Millia Calvinianorum Ad Ecclesiam Revocatam (Two Million Calvinists brought back to the Church). Another medal is inscribed
Birth of a legend: Louis' iconography begins with this 1659 engraving of the young king recording 'triumphs' over Habsburg opponents in Spain and the Empire and lauding Louis as 'un prince sans pareil'. The ritual iconography of the king rapidly developed after he began his period of personal rule, with Louis appearing as the 'sun king', Apollo, in court ballets (right) and in extravagant antique Roman and martial pose — as below in this 1662 engraving; the high plumage of the helmet emphasising the king's 'social height'.

'Forty Towns on the Rhine captured in a Single Month'. The effect is not unlike that of headlines in a twentieth-century newspaper.

These rather general eulogies of the king were accompanied by many more specific messages. The history of the reign was presented, in the words of an official historian (as it happens, Racine), as 'an unbroken series of marvels'. More or less the same series of marvels recurs in the official newspapers, in the tapestries produced at the royal factory of the Gobelins, in the decoration of the state apartments at Versailles (directed by Charles Le Brun), and in the so-called 'medallic history' of the reign.

On the international front, we see, again and again, the diplomatic defeat of Spain in the contest for precedence, the conquest of Franche-Comté, the crossing of the Rhine and the invasion of the Dutch Republic, the humiliation of Genoa, etc. On the domestic front, there is the issuing of a law-code, the embellishment of Paris, the restoration of military discipline, and the re-establishment of religious unity — at least outwardly — by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Examples of what modern media analysts call the 'pseudo-event' and the 'non-event' can also be found. An engraving was published in 1671 showing an official visit of the king to the Academy of Sciences, a visit which had not actually taken place. On the other hand, a medal struck to commemorate the devastation of Heidelberg in 1689 was not included in the official medallic history. Once again the term 'impression management' seems to be in order.

Who then, was sending these messages? Who was speaking through the rituals, the statues, the poems and so on? Do we hear the voices of individual artists alone or was there someone telling them what to say? Was it Louis himself? The image of the king presented in his so-called 'memoirs' describes him as taking every political decision and as being concerned with the welfare of his subjects in every
detail. However, we happen to know that Louis was not responsible for his own image. He did not even write these memoirs—their text was ghosted by a team of collaborators. As for the creation of the king’s public image, it was supervised by a leading minister, the previously mentioned Colbert, who functioned for some twenty years as what we might call a minister for propaganda.

Not long after taking his place at the side of the young king, Colbert can be found corresponding with a writer and critic, Chapelain, about the best way to ensure the king’s glory. Chapelain’s confidential reports on the French literary scene have survived, a fascinating assessment of the aesthetic, moral and political merits and faults of the leading writers of the time. Chapelain also recommended the use of visual media such as medals, pyramids, columns, equestrian statues, triumphal arches, and so on. As Superintendent of the King’s Works, Colbert was well placed to act on this advice, and so he did. He spent a good deal of public money on artistic and literary patronage.

This kind of patronage was traditional by the seventeenth century, but the scale was grander than usual, as we have seen, and in any case Colbert went further. Like the good bureaucrat he was, he wanted an organised, institutionalised system, and so he set up what was known as the ‘little academy’, a small group of men of letters (including Charles Perrault, better known today as the author of Little Red Riding Hood) who met at his house twice weekly to advise on the king’s public image, vetting other people’s projects and devising some of their own, notably inscriptions for medals. Academies of Science (1666), Architecture (1671) and Music (1672) were also founded (the Academy of Painting and the Académie Française were already in existence by this time). I do not mean to suggest that the aim of these foundations was purely cosmetic, to put a good face on Louis and his regime. It might be more exact to call Colbert ‘Minister for the Arts’ rather than Minister for Propaganda. All the same, he was concerned to get what political return he could for Louis out of the money that was spent.

For whose benefit, to convince whom, was this money spent? Not (I think) for the majority of the king’s subjects, the 20 million Frenchmen and women of the period. In this respect the propaganda for Louis is quite unlike that for twentieth-century rulers. His media was not mass media. The royal memoirs, or better, reflections on the art of government, were written for an audience of one, the Dauphin, and were never intended for publication. The flattering verses by Corneille, Racine, and many lesser poets were addressed in the first instance to the king and read aloud to him, although they were circulated more widely later.

The rituals, festivals and ballets may resemble television in their glitter and glamour and their simultaneous appeal to eye and ear, but unlike today’s media they were designed for a minority of privileged viewers, the court. All Parisians had an opportunity to see the major processions, arches of triumph and other monuments, but only a few would have been able to decode the iconography and the Latin inscriptions. After all, France in this period was a culture of restricted literacy, in which 75 per cent of brides and grooms in the years 1686–90, were unable to sign their names to the marriage registers.

I believe that the broadcasters of
information about Louis were trying to reach three audiences in particular. In the first place, a high-status domestic audience, who may be conveniently described in a standard phrase of the time as the court and the city, la cour et la ville. In the second place, foreign courts. Hence ambassadors were invited to the festivals at Versailles and presented with medals, tapestries, royal portraits and so on. One reason for preferring Latin inscriptions to French was their international currency. In the third place, odd as it may seem now, the broadcasters were trying to reach us, or more exactly, posterity as they envisaged it. Hence monuments were built to last, official histories written, and medals buried in the foundations of buildings such as the new Louvre or the Observatory.

What kind of reception did these images receive and how successful were they in presenting Louis to these audiences? There is obviously no way of measuring the effects of all this propaganda, but at least a few reactions can be cited. On the positive side, the king's rivals and enemies were sufficiently impressed to imitate some of his methods. William III had his own medallion history, the emperor Leopold, built Schönbrunn as a Viennese Versailles, while Peter the Great founded an official newspaper on the model of the Gazette, a tapestry factory on the model of the Gobelins, and an Academy of Sciences on the model of the Académie des Sciences. At home, it is not difficult to find examples of private individuals, like the Duc de Feuillade, who took the initiative in raising monuments to the king's glory.

On the negative side, there is evidence of a vocal minority of dissenters. For the French Protestants, for example, Louis was not Augustus or Constantine but Pharaoh or Nero. It is likely that some of the attempts to glorify Louis were counter-productive, notably the statue on Place des Victoires which was frequently condemned as blasphemous for its inscription, 'To the Immortal Man', and for the lamps burning before it, as if before a holy image. The statue was indeed a gift to the counter-propagandists, to English, Dutch and German writers of pamphlets against Louis, especially in the last twenty-five years of the reign. The Dutch were particularly adept in parodying the official propaganda for Louis. On one occasion they reprinted one of the medallion histories of the reign and slipped into it five plates of satirical medals. Home-made satires on Louis were also in circulation in manuscript, especially in the later years of the reign.

To view this enterprise of image-making in perspective, it is of course necessary to look at changes during Louis' reign, as well as to examine the place of the reign in developments over the long-term. Like other parts of Europe, from Spain to Sweden, seventeenth-century France was a society in which power was increasingly centralised. There was consequently a greater
The powerful ally, this engraving from a 1680 almanac stresses the benefits expressed in tangible terms by engravings of towns etc. ceded by France's enemies—that Louis' supporters in Europe could expect both from his wars and diplomacy.

need than before for a magnificent symbol of centrality. Hence the attention paid to the images of rulers such as Philip IV of Spain and Louis XIII of France. Louis defined himself by comparison to these rulers, his father-in-law and his father respectively, imitating them in order to surpass them. Philip IV was the planet king. Louis the sun. Philip had a Hall of Mirrors in his palace at Madrid. Louis a still more splendid one at Versailles. The Spanish court was famous for its ritualised formality, but Louis made the rituals of Versailles still more elaborate. At the same time his representations emphasised his accessibility to his subjects, in contrast to the remoteness of Philip IV. Louis' style might be described as midway between the stiff Spanish manner and the more demotic style of other seventeenth-century kings, notably Gustav Adolf of Sweden, who liked to speak to his subjects in the marketplace.

Centralisation had its price. In the course of the century, there was a dramatic increase in the demands which the government made on the people, both for money and for recruits to the army. These demands were frequently resisted; small-scale rebellions were common. The higher nobility resented the way in which the king ruled without consulting them.

The regime was consequently in need of legitimisation. However, in the course of the seventeenth century the French monarchy went through what may be called a 'legitimation crisis' or a 'crisis of representations'. The increasing acceptance of the Cartesian universe, in other words the image of the world as a vast machine, encouraged scepticism about the efficacy of the royal touch and about the analogy between Louis XIV and the sun. There was a dramatic contrast between the ardent young monarch of the 1660s and 1670s, who campaigned in person and was generally victorious, and the old man who sat in Versailles receiving news of French defeats.

All these difficulties needed to be camouflaged by the media. It is surely no accident that the statue campaign dates from the mid-1680s, or that most of the 300-odd medals as well as the two medallic histories were produced in the latter half of the reign. The increasing amount of time, energy and money poured into the representations of Louis XIV may therefore be interpreted as a response to the increasingly acute problems faced by the regime. As the political scientist Harold Lasswell once wrote, 'A well-established ideology perpetuates itself with little planned propaganda ... when thought is taken about ways and means of sowing conviction, conviction has already languished'.

**FOR FURTHER READING:**

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This article summarises the main themes and theses of a book with the same title, to be published in May by Yale University Press at £19.95.

*Alone I did it*; this engraving portrays Louis as the master tactician personally directing (as the accompanying text asserts) the capture of Maastricht in the Spanish Netherlands in April 1691.