



# The Techniques of Propaganda

For many years, the idea of studying propaganda in a communication class was deemed laughable. Aside from wartime, which was often typified by heavy-handed propagandistic techniques, propaganda didn't seem to be operating. Only a few cheered the addition of this propaganda chapter nearly two decades ago. Many thought it a waste of time to cover an antiquated topic. At about that same time, however, a new focus in propaganda emerged, and the communication discipline began to investigate ideological communication in its various forms—especially as it operates in popular culture.

Since that time, we have witnessed dramatic examples of the power of modern propaganda including the fall of the former Soviet Union and its satellite states and the dismantling of long-standing liberal programs in social welfare at home. Propaganda forced the South African government to free Nelson Mandela and helped reverse the longstanding practice of apartheid. Propaganda was also used to justify the use of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, financial bailouts of the economies of several ill-

managed countries, and corporate piracy at World-Com, Enron, and elsewhere. And we can expect more propaganda coming to us from religious, political, and economic ideologues as they try to sell their systems of beliefs and values.

As you can see, far from being a rickety and antiquated concept, propaganda is alive and active in this first decade of the new millennium. As receivers, we need to recognize propaganda when we encounter it and respond accordingly. This chapter outlines the dimensions of modern propaganda and offers some tools for recognizing and responding to it.

## DEFINING PROPAGANDA

What do you think of when you hear someone say, “That’s just propaganda”? How do you differentiate “propaganda” from “persuasion”? How does it differ from “coercion” or “education” or “culture” or “advertising” or “public relations”? Some people would say that they are all one and the same—that virtually

everything involving communication to persuade is in some way propagandistic. The problem with defining propaganda as “everything” is that it gets you nowhere. It doesn’t allow you to say the words “I love you” or “I’m sorry” or “I think I understand, but please go over it once more for me” without spreading propaganda. If you have a definition that cannot distinguish one kind of persuasive communication from another, you don’t have much of a definition. Let’s look at the origin of the word and at its denotation or dictionary definition.

The word “propaganda” comes from the Latin *propagare*, which means “to spread or grow,” much as the word *propagate* (which comes from the same Latin root) indicates growth or spreading. Originally instituted by Pope Gregory XV in the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide in the seventeenth century, its purpose was to spread the faith and Christianize the world. It was a noble cause to be a true and successful propagandist in 1623.

*Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition, defines *propaganda* as “ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one’s cause or to damage an opposing cause.” Three key words in this definition help distinguish propaganda from other kinds of communication. The most important is “cause,” which implies some sort of dogma, value system, or ideology that one is trying to propagate—whether it be religious dogma, political dogma, economic dogma, vegetarian dogma, anti-vivisectionist dogma, pro-life dogma, pro-choice dogma, or a host of others. This helps us rule out many kinds of communication that aren’t dogmatic or related to a cause. For example, although advertising promotes a brand, it doesn’t promote a cause or ideology; and the same holds true for most public relations. They might promote a new bank in town, the “Pumpkin Fest” in my town, or a local hospital, but they usually aren’t used to promote a cause or ideology unless it’s a candidate or religious organization. The second-most-important word in the definition is “deliberately,” because it helps us rule out a great many kinds of communication in which there is no intent to spread any cause. The third-most-important word is “spread,” which carries with it the idea of reaching many persons with communication about the cause. This helps us distinguish propaganda from instances in which individuals are trying to affect only one or

a few other persons—family, dorm floor, fraternity or sorority, or friend. The 1993 *American Heritage College Dictionary* echoes this approach, defining *propagandize* as “to engage in propaganda for (a doctrine or cause).” Thus, not all communication is propaganda—propaganda deliberately spreads a doctrine or a cause.

What about all those negative connotations that pop up when the word “propaganda” is mentioned? Where did all that negativity come from? Some of it has come from overzealous religious propagandists who knock on our doors or grab us by the arm and ask us whether we have been saved or reborn. Some of it comes from deep-seated prejudices about race, gender, social class, or ethnicity. But most of the negativity associated with the word “propaganda” stems from wartime propaganda historically used by “us” and “them.” Figure 1 exhibits such propaganda. And much of the paranoia about propaganda stems from the tremendous communication power made possible by current and future technologies. As Garth Jowatt and Victoria O’Donnell (1986) note in their book *Propaganda and Persuasion*,

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were periods of great expansion of propaganda activities. The growth of the mass media and improvements in transportation led to the development of mass audiences. . . . Each of the mass media—print, movies, radio and then television—contributed its unique qualities to new techniques of propaganda. Radio, in particular, brought into existence the possibility of continuous international propaganda, whereas television has increased the problem of “cultural imperialism,” where one nation’s culture is imposed upon another nation. (p. 63)



To see some modern and historical examples of propaganda in action, access InfoTrac College Edition, and enter the word “propaganda” in the subject search engine. Select the subdivisions option and then the analysis option. Select the item titled “Selling the War on Television,” by Susan Douglas, about the six-part reality television series *Profiles from the Frontline*, produced for ABC by Jerry

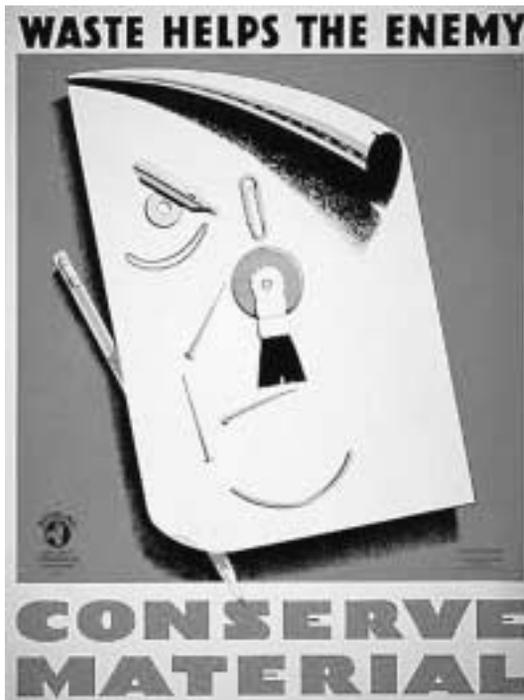


FIGURE 1 Here are several examples of wartime propaganda. You can see that they are quite heavy-handed. Not all propaganda is so obvious.

(Rosie the Riveter, "We Can Do It!" courtesy of U.S. National Archives. Produced by Westinghouse for the War Production. Created by J. Howard Miller. Modifications © Jone Lewis 2001.)

Bruckheimer (*Black Hawk Down*, *Pearl Harbor*, and *Top Gun*). Report to the class on some of the filmic techniques used by Bruckheimer. If possible, view reruns or archived episodes on the ABC Web site.

### A Working Definition

It is essential to define the object of one's study as specifically as possible to distinguish it from similar but not identical concepts. We need a definition that will allow us to identify the critical differences between, for example, propaganda and debate or propaganda and advertising. If we defined everything as propaganda, it would be both easy and impossible to identify it.

- *Propaganda is ideological.* For our purposes, propaganda is, first and foremost, ideological. It tries to sell a belief system or dogma. Propaganda can be religious, political, or economic.
- *Propaganda uses mass media.* Propaganda uses some form of mass communication to sell ideology. Media that could be used in the propaganda process include speeches; documentary films, TV programs, and radio shows; posters and billboards; and mass mailings. In addition, postage stamps, coins and paper currency, and music, art, and drama have all been used for propaganda. This fits with the key words “deliberately” and “spread” from the dictionary definition. However, beliefs that are spread interpersonally do not affect large numbers of people and so do not qualify as propaganda.
- *Propaganda conceals.* One or some combination of the following is concealed from the target audience: (1) the source of the communication, (2) the source's goal, (3) the other side of the story, (4) the techniques being used by the source in sending the message, and (5) the results of the propaganda if successful (Taylor, 1979).
- *Propaganda aims at uniformity.* Propaganda seeks commonality in the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of its receivers. So, although most ads want you to believe something “about” the brand—say, Fords—they generally don't try to make you believe “in” the brand. However, in-

ternal communication at Ford that is aimed at employee morale tries to do just that, and thus is propaganda.

- *Propaganda circumvents the reasoning process.* Usually, propaganda appeals to the hearts and not the minds of the audience. If the propagandist presented both sides of the issues, people would make up their own minds, and the propaganda would probably fail. To bypass logical thinking, propaganda uses biased information that stirs up audience emotions and “forces” the audience to the opinion or conclusion of the propagandist. For example, television evangelists use their (biased) sources to work on audience fears, desires, and so on to move their audience to a foregone conclusion (such as repentance, making a donation, or converting others).

Using this definition, we can see that not all advertisements are propaganda: They usually are not ideological, and we usually know the source and the goal. However, some advertisements are propaganda. Remember the harp seal ad from Chapter 1? It was clearly ideological and circumvented the reasoning process. It concealed its source and the fact that harp seal meat wasn't used in the fish sandwich. Finally, it certainly aimed at uniformity of behavior and used mass media.

The pro-life film *Silent Scream*, touched on in a previous chapter, is an example of propaganda on film. It uses all the terms and techniques discussed thus far to “suggest” to the audience that an aborted fetus was a living human being until the abortionist's forceps crushed its skull. On the other side of the issue, the pro-choice forces made similarly emotional suggestions in a recent magazine ad that depicted an unbent coat hanger with its sharp ends, along with the headline “To Many of Our Daughters, This Looks Like a Coat Hanger.” Sub-headlines then asked the reader to “Please Sign the Pledge to Keep It That Way” and “Add Your Name to Mine—After Sixteen Years of Safety, Time Is Running Out.”

A computer program entitled “Womb with a View” probably qualifies as propaganda by our definition. It suggests that it merely provides infor-

mation about pregnancy and “the baby’s” development in the womb, but it is sponsored by Project Reality, a pro-life organization affiliated with another organization, Birthright of Chicago. The source clearly spreads an ideology using a mass medium while it conceals its real intention through its self-characterization as “educational.” It aims at uniform behavior (carrying the fetus to term) by involving the target audience in emotional versus logical appeals (notice that all references are to “the baby,” not to the fetus, and that “mother” learns about what she is experiencing while recording her “personal thoughts” and “special moments.”)

Let’s look at what some experts on modern propaganda have to say and compare their views with our definition.

### Views of Modern Propaganda

Modern propaganda began with the development of the modern mass media of communication (see Chapter 13 for more on this point). With the advent of the loudspeaker, radio, film, and television, persuaders and demagogues quickly learned to turn these media to their advantage. In the United States, people such as Huey Long and Franklin Roosevelt used these new media to gain the support of millions. Elsewhere, Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union and Adolf Hitler in Germany used the new technologies to great advantage. Scholars and social critics became concerned about the influence of propaganda especially when it was coupled with electronic media.

Early investigators also tried to define propaganda. For example, L. W. Doob (1935), a world-famous sociologist, said that the use of suggestion is the key. If suggestion is used, “then this process may be called propaganda, regardless of whether or not the propagandist intends to exercise control.” However, if the same result would have occurred with or without the use of suggestion, “then this process may be called education regardless of the intention of the educator” (p. 20). Doob used the word “suggestion” very explicitly. He did not mean everyday suggestions like “I suggest trying the burritos here” or “I suggest trying this sweater with those slacks.”

Instead, he was referring to emotional appeals and the “predetermined conclusion.” Thus, in Doob’s definition, propaganda refers to a well-planned campaign of carefully orchestrated messages and cues that would lead the ordinary person to a specified conclusion.

Take, for example, Leni Reifenstahl’s 1934 pro-Nazi film *Triumph of the Will*. Throughout the film, we see row upon row and rank upon rank of German troops as far as the camera’s eye can see. The ranks and columns are all giving the “Heil Hitler” salute and raising their flags and banners. These images are accompanied by stirring martial music, Hitler Youth brigades beating drums, and flames burning from “eternal” torches. Above it all stands the führer himself, looking out over the crowds as if to fix each person with his gaze. He begins to speak, quietly at first, but then building volume until he is almost screaming his message. The crowd roars back, “Sieg Hiel!” as the camera focuses on Hitler’s emotion-filled face, dripping with sweat from his exertion. Even viewers who didn’t know either German or history would understand the “suggestion” given by the filmic cues. A less spectacular example of suggestion might be a picture of a car wreck accompanied by the words “Don’t let a friend drink and drive.”



To learn more about this famous propaganda film and its genius director, access InfoTrac College Edition, and type the name “Reifenstahl” in the search engine. Read the article and look at the photographs of shots from the film. If you can arrange for a showing of this masterpiece with your class, do so.

J. Driencourt, a French student of political science, defined propaganda this way: “Propaganda is everything” (Taylor, 1979). Of course, that isn’t very helpful in distinguishing propaganda from other communication forms, as we have noted. To Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda, it had to be covert: “Propaganda becomes ineffective the moment we are aware of it” (Taylor, 1979, p. 23).

J. A. C. Brown (1963), a British scholar interested in propaganda, emphasized several critical points as he developed a definition. First, he said, propaganda is a “scheme for propagating a doctrine or practice for influencing the emotional attitudes” (p. 12). So, not all communication is propaganda—it must propose a doctrine, a dogma, or an ideology aimed at people’s emotional state, not their rational state. Under this definition, most advertising is not propagandistic unless it promotes an ideology. (Some would argue that advertising does promote an ideology: conspicuous consumption.) Under Brown’s definition, most religious communication would be considered propagandistic because it espouses a dogma and makes use of emotional, not logical, appeals. Similarly, most governmental communication would be considered propagandistic because it promotes the ideologies of, say, democracy and capitalism.

Brown added another stipulation to distinguish propaganda from argumentation: In propaganda, the “answers are determined in advance” (p. 13). All propaganda attempts to change people’s minds, but not all mind changing is due to propaganda; if there is an honest interchange of arguments, or group discussions without hidden agendas, that is not propaganda. A court trial is not propaganda either—it espouses no dogma, and the final outcome isn’t predetermined. Legislative debate over policy issues may use some of the techniques of propaganda, but as a whole, it is not propaganda, as the outcome isn’t known in advance.

Brown maintained that propaganda is always against something at the same time that it is for something else—the communication isn’t propaganda if there are no alternatives. There can be propaganda by censorship as well. Brown pointed out that it wouldn’t have been propaganda to teach that the earth is the center of the solar system in pre-Copernican times, but it would have been propaganda to suppress, censor, or conceal the ideas of Copernicus or Galileo, as was done by the Catholic Church until 1822. Propaganda nearly always conceals something: the purpose of the propagandist, the means used to achieve that purpose, and so on. The distinction between education and propaganda is this: “The former tells people how to think; the latter tells them what to think” (p. 21). Brown de-

scribed how this blurring could be carried out even in such “bias-free” subjects as mathematics. He reported the research of one social scientist who found that a widely used American math textbook contained over six hundred problems that focused on such “capitalistic” concepts as rent, interest, and investments. Yet you and I would be unlikely to think that the textbook was propagandistic. Finally, propaganda has to be “part of a deliberate scheme for indoctrination” (p. 22).

Other people (including Jacques Ellul, whose theory we will examine later) maintain that in a technocracy propaganda is the combined rules, ordinances, administrative directives, patterns of living and learning, and social graces of the modern political state. It also is an automatic extension of a technological society and can be covert or overt (Ellul, 1979). In other words, in this view, much of our contemporary technocratic culture is propaganda. Figure 2 demonstrates the use of propaganda during the American Revolution.

Propaganda scholar Dierdre Johnson (1994) suggests that propaganda messages fall along a continuum ranging from pure propaganda to little or no propaganda. Many messages are only partially propagandistic, using some propaganda devices. She does agree with our working definition, noting that three critical elements in any propaganda message are concealment, manipulation, and the short-circuiting of logical reasoning through emotional arguments and suggestion. As she notes, “It’s a matter of degree.”

Propaganda experts Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson (1992) agree with Johnson that “not all persuasion is propaganda.” They remind us that the conception of propaganda developed from the traditional view that it was something only the “villains” used to a more contemporary view involving “mass ‘suggestion’ or influence through the manipulation of symbols and the psychology of the individual” (p. 9).

Jowatt and O’Donnell (1992) support the views of Johnson and of Pratkanis and Aronson. They trace the development of propaganda from the Vatican’s *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* to the idea that only the “bad guys” use propaganda. And they take a more current communication perspective focusing on all the elements of the SMCR (source–message–channel–receiver) model, show-



**FIGURE 2** Here is an early use of propaganda: a depiction of the Boston Massacre engraved, printed, and sold by Paul Revere. It tells only one side of the story, and Revere's goal is not clear.

(Used by permission of The New York Historical Society, New York City.)

ing that propaganda is “a subcategory of persuasion as well as information” (p. 3). Jowatt and O’Donnell also identify terms often used as substitutes for propaganda (such as “deceit,” “brainwashing,” “psychological warfare,” and “distortion”), but they note

that these words actually describe only the *characteristics* of propaganda messages, and not the *goal* of the propaganda—the crucial element to focus on. The propagandist’s goal or purpose implies deliberate intent, which, they say, “is linked with a clear

institutional ideology. . . . In fact, the purpose of propaganda is to send out an ideology to an audience with a related objective” (p. 2). What might be the ideology in Figure 3?

In sum, not all communication we get via the mass media is propaganda by our definition. You can identify messages that clearly are propagandistic or that border on being propaganda. Being able to identify propaganda reduces its effectiveness and perhaps even renders it harmless. However, knowing what propaganda is represents only part of the story; we also need to know how the propagandist works. What tactics are used, and how can we identify them?

## THE TACTICS OF PROPAGANDA

From the early uses of propaganda to move entire nations in World Wars I and II up to the present, many people have attempted to pinpoint the tactics propagandists use. The Institute for Propaganda Analysis identified certain devices, and many instructors taught them (Miller, 1937). In fact, some of you may be familiar with them. They are a good place to begin the study of propaganda tactics.

### Plain Folks

The “plain folks” tactic is used by propagandists to convince the audience that the public figures or groups they represent are not well trained, shrewd, and manipulative but are just plain folks like you and me. Politicians are using this device when they put on bib overalls and work boots and carry a red bandanna to meet with rural audiences. Sometimes, the technique is as simple as using common language to appeal to the audience. The tactic might take the form of plain, everyday actions such as splitting wood or driving a tractor. These devices use pretense to create identification between source and receiver. But such sources are not plain folks at all. Instead, they are trying to manipulate the audience into following their call through a false feeling of kinship. They try to communicate that the candidate or spokesperson is “of the people” even though that might be far from the truth.

For example, in one famous advertising campaign, “Mr. Bartels” and “Mr. James,” dressed as country bumpkins, sat in rockers on the porch of a farm house promoting their Bartels and James wine coolers. In actuality, both were multimillionaires. Because they weren’t promoting an ideology, this use of plain folks was not propagandistic, but many uses of the tactic are. Public relations appeals frequently use the plain-folks technique. In the face of falling enrollments and complaints that my university was not “user friendly,” the president, his staff, and the deans of colleges showed up at the dorms on “move-in” day dressed in Northern Illinois T-shirts to “help” students unload their belongings and move into their rooms. Though not propaganda, because no ideology was being promoted and nothing was concealed, this PR appeal did use the plain-folks approach.

### Testimonial

The testimonial is a familiar device in today’s world of advertising, where well-known celebrities or athletes tell us why we should buy this product or that. Under our definition of propaganda, this use of the testimonial is not propagandistic, but other uses of testimonials clearly are. Examples include refugees who testify about atrocities committed by the government in their homeland, persons held captive by terrorists relating their experience, and a politician testifying as to the difficulties of dismantling apartheid in South Africa. In each case, we cannot tell whether the people giving the testimony are actually reliable sources of information. They might be dupes of some government. Further, we do not know for certain what the goal of the source is. Did the hostage become converted to the terrorists’ ideology? (This sometimes happens.) Have the refugees been duped by their spokespersons? And what will be the outcome if we follow the advice of the testimonials? These are but a few of the concealed elements in these testimonials.

Of course, there are also many testimonials that do not promote any particular ideology or dogma. A previously obese man holds up his old jumbo-sized trousers and testifies that he lost all that weight simply by eating one of Subway’s low-fat



## For Jews in the former Soviet Union, the exit signs are clearly marked.

The signs are all too familiar. Brown-shirted fascists march. Synagogues mysteriously go up in flames. Right-wing extremist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy rants against Jews and "Zionist plots." And his party wins more votes than any other in Russia.

Once again, opportunists blame terrible conditions on their traditional scapegoat—the Jews.

And for Jews, anti-Semitism just adds to the misery of life in the former Soviet Union: Severe economic hardship. Political instability. The depressing lack of opportunity for an education, for a better life.

**But there is hope. Operation Exodus.**

So far, the UJA-Federation Operation Exodus Campaign has helped rescue 500,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union—69,132 in 1993 alone. And brought them home to Israel.

Yet, 1.4 million Jews remain. With your support, they can leave the hatred and despair behind. Before it's too late.

Please give generously to Operation Exodus and the Annual Campaign. This time we can clearly see what's happening over there. And all the signs point in the same direction. Out.

**FIGURE 3** This ad uses emotional language in describing what it is like to live in a totalitarian state. What parts of the description fit the definition of propaganda given in this chapter?

(Reprinted with permission of United Jewish Appeal, Inc.)

sandwiches for lunch every day. A recent purchaser of a muffler tells about how much she saved by going to Magic Muffler instead of Midas. Neither of these qualifies as propaganda by our definition, although both are probably effective advertising or PR. However, when the spokesperson (celebrity or ordinary citizen) testifies that a certain candidate or religion is superior, the use of testimonial would be considered propaganda as we have defined it.

### Bandwagon

Propagandists, like some advertisers, try to convince the audience that it is almost too late to take advantage of the offer, to join the organization, to follow the fad, to vote for the candidate, to be contemporary—to get on the bandwagon. The history of the word “bandwagon” gives us a clue to the basic intent behind the appeal. In previous centuries, when the circus came to town, part of the razzmatazz used to attract customers was the circus parade along the main street. The first wagon in the parade always carried the band. Being on the bandwagon became synonymous with being a leader—the person who was “out in front” of an idea or a fashion. During World War II, propaganda posters stressed that everyone needed to be involved in the war effort. One noted that “85 Million Americans Hold War Bonds.” That would have been more than half the adult population—quite a bandwagon. Again, not all uses of the tactic are propagandistic. When an advertiser announces, “Everyone Will Be at Our Annual 50% Off of 50% Off Sale!” this is bandwagon tactics but not propaganda.

When you receive a pitch such as “Sign the petition now! Send a wake-up call to the legislature! The people’s rights before the rights of capitalistic corporations!” those phrases are tip-offs. The time limit and the emphasis on joining “the people” suggest that everyone is getting on the bandwagon—don’t miss out! Most petitions are appeals to get on the bandwagon.

### Card Stacking

Building an overwhelming case on one side of an issue while concealing another, perhaps equally persuasive, side is called “card stacking.” Of course, few

persuaders try to tell both sides of a story, but responsible persuaders at least suggest that there are other sides. With card stacking, however, the other side may not even be recognized, or it might be downplayed or possibly denigrated. Thus, the audience gets only one version of the story. A good example is the abortion issue—clearly, both sides “stack the cards” with overwhelming evidence. Public relations firms often use scads of evidence to stack the cards on behalf of their clients. Critical receivers must try to identify at least the existence of another side.

### Transference

The propaganda technique of transference is similar to Rank’s “association” tactic for intensification. For example, when a politician is photographed in front of the Lincoln Memorial, the aura of the U.S. government and historical Washington, DC is transferred to her or him. The implication is that the candidate is a patriot who will follow in the footsteps of the great leaders of the past. This tactic seeks to “carry over the authority, sanction and prestige of something we respect and revere to something (the propagandist) would have us accept” (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1938, n. p.). When presidents refer to “God’s will” or “God’s goodness” or close their speeches with prayer, they are using the ultimate transfer.

Transference also resembles an endorsement or a testimonial in that the credibility of the endorser transfers to the product. In international politics, Saddam Hussein was compared to Hitler—Hitler’s negative qualities transferred to the Iraqi dictator. In Illinois, calling a politician a “machine Democrat” links him or her with traditional Chicago politics and transfers the negativity of the Chicago political machine to the candidate. In contrast, calling the candidate a “downstate” politician dissociates him or her from the Chicago machine and transfers the positive values of small-town Illinois to the candidate.

To destroy credibility, the opposition is linked to an undesirable action, person, or organization. Or the candidate is linked to big business, lobbyists, the CIA, or organized crime, and any negativity associated with these groups transfers to the candidate

and ruins his or her credibility. Again, the transfer technique is used in public relations. The credibility/visibility of some celebrity is used to transfer credibility/visibility to a particular brand, candidate, good cause, or organization.

### Glittering Generalities

Abstract language, highly charged with emotion and cultural values, is used by propagandists because of its power. Such words seem to “glitter” with high purpose and energy that can short-circuit people’s reasoning process and make them jump to conclusions. Words such as “justice,” “freedom,” “dignity,” “equality,” “patriot,” “integrity,” and “wisdom” are actually not very specific, yet they evoke powerful emotions in audiences. Who hasn’t heard some speaker introducing a candidate who is “dedicated to the continuance of justice for all in this great nation of ours; who has worked diligently for our freedom and dignity, fighting for equality. My friends, I give you a patriot of great integrity and wisdom—Senator Fogbound!” Later, of course, the voters may discover that Fogbound drinks too much, sexually harasses his assistants, and accepts bribes. Former Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich provided GOP candidates with a list of glittering generalities to use to refer to themselves or GOP policies during the campaign of 1998. The list included words like “activist,” “candid,” “challenge,” “change,” “family,” “children,” “choice,” “courage,” “dreams,” “duty,” “freedom,” “hard work,” “help,” “humane,” “listen,” “peace,” “share,” “strength,” and “success.” These simple words seem concrete but lack real referents and hence rely on their “glitter” to have an effect.

The glittering generalities of the advertising world are only slightly less emotional and vague. Some examples are “heavy-duty,” “youthful,” “vitality,” “jumbo,” “old-fashioned,” “homemade,” and “glamorous.” No one has ever heard of a “light-duty battery” or a “medium-duty vacuum cleaner,” just as no one has ever heard of a “small” or “medium shrimp”—they come in only three sizes: colossal, mammoth, and jumbo. Leaf through any popular magazine, and you will find hundreds of glittering generalities like these. Of course, in these cases, the glittering generalities aren’t being used to

market an ideology or dogma, so, under our definition, they don’t qualify as propaganda.

### Name Calling

The other side of glittering generalities is name-calling—using words that have highly negative connotations to smear another person or group. For example, we might call a certain religious group “a bunch of zealous, fanatical Jesus freaks” to marginalize or even demonize them. During World War II, Germans were called “huns,” “krauts,” or “heinies,” and Japanese were called “Japs” or “nips”; during the Korean and Vietnam wars, the enemies were called “gooks,” “slants,” “slopes,” or “Charlies.” Why? These names reduced the enemy to the level of brutes with low intelligence and apelike behavior.

The current controversy over political correctness highlights the power of name-calling. For example, at Penn State University, a student was almost dismissed under the campus speech code’s ban on “hate speech” (a term that turns up frequently in speech codes). He had called a group of black women “water buffaloes,” and though the charges were ultimately dismissed, his case drew national attention to the political correctness issue and to the name-calling (National Report, 1993). Newt Gingrich also supplied GOP candidates with a list of name-calling words to use when discussing their opponents or Democratic policies during the campaign of 1998. The list included words like “anti” (flag, family, and so on), “betray,” “corruption,” “crisis,” “decay,” “devour,” “failure,” “greed,” “hypocrisy,” “incompetent,” “liberal,” “lies,” “self-serving,” “shallow,” “sick,” “unionists,” and “waste.”



To learn about these and other, more sophisticated methods and examples of propaganda analysis, access InfoTrac College Edition, and enter the word “propaganda” in the subject search engine. Select the subdivisions and then the analysis option. Go to the item titled “Understanding Propaganda from a General Semantic Perspective” by Charles Fleming to see how various tools for analyzing language have been used in contemporary contexts.

## CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON PROPAGANDA

J. A. C. Brown, whom we met earlier in this chapter, examined propaganda from a contemporary perspective. He identified several prerequisites for propaganda and the stages through which propaganda passes. Brown surprised many critics of propaganda because he rejected the “propaganda as deceit” and “brainwashing” approaches. Instead, he held that to be truly successful propaganda has to tell not lies but the truth. What makes the propaganda effective is the way in which the propagandist interprets the truth. Brown (1963) quoted an official of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) commenting on British propaganda in World War II:

Do not say anything which you do not believe to correspond with the facts as known to you; and secondly do not say anything to one country, or audience, which is or looks inconsistent with what you are saying to any other country or audience. (p. 94)

This makes perfect sense in terms of our old friend credibility. If you use lies and are caught, you destroy your credibility. However, if you interpret the truth to your own advantage, only your interpretation can be questioned. We know that during World War II many persons in occupied Europe and even in Germany listened to the BBC because it was the most credible source of news. There was a Nazi news service, but it had been caught lying too many times, and the public distrusted it.

Brown also described the stages through which propaganda passes. In the pre-propaganda stage, propagandists seek to make their messages stand out among all the competing messages. The propagandist may spend time distributing leaflets, knocking on doors, or displaying posters. The purpose of this stage is to catch the audience’s attention by appealing to powerful emotions already in the audience, such as hatred, jealousy, envy, love, fear, hope, and guilt. Frequently, creating guilt feelings in the audience does this. Guilt is most powerfully called up in

the audience using suggestion. During the 1996 Democratic National Convention, for instance, actor Christopher Reeve was a key speaker. He had been paralyzed from the waist down during a horse riding accident. He informed the convention and television audiences that one in five Americans suffered from some sort of disability and that the Democratic Party had always stood for taking care of the downtrodden. He reminded them that Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who could hardly lift himself from his wheelchair, had lifted the country out of the depths of the Great Depression. All these references served to evoke feelings of guilt in those who didn’t have a disability or who hadn’t helped someone who did have a disability, thus setting the stage for major planks in the Democratic platform—clearly a piece of propaganda by our definition.

After attracting the audience’s attention and interest, the propagandist creates emotional tension. Perhaps the audience is told that they have been kept from some opportunity, that their legal rights have been trampled, that their heritage has been stained, or that they have been lied to. The powerful emotional tension that is developed is identified with some enemy—usually an out-group such as the Jews in Nazi Germany. According to Brown, the out-group is identified in several ways:

- *Stereotyping* Through powerful descriptive language, the out-group is characterized with negative attributes and qualities. Thus, in propaganda, the Jew is cheap, the black is lazy, the Scottish and the Irish are drunkards. Of course, there are members of these groups who are not model citizens. For example, rates of alcoholism in parts of Scotland and Ireland are some of the highest in the world, but this does not mean that all Scottish and Irish are drunkards.
- *Substitution of names* Again using powerful language, the propagandist substitutes unfavorable labels for neutral ones. For instance, instead of using the label “pro-choice,” many abortion foes label the other side as “pro-abortion.” This irritates those who want to maintain the right of women to choose because many in the pro-choice camp would never consider abortion as a viable option for themselves.

- *Repetition.* Propaganda tells the same tale over and over again using similar language, examples, and references. Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels thought that the masses would believe anything if they were told the “big lie” enough times. We see this approach used all the time in slogans and jingles.
- *Pinpointing the enemy.* Specific members of the out-group are selected as representing the worst aspects of the stereotype. Thus, liberal Democrats are described as big spenders who increase the budget deficit, and Republicans are painted as the wealthy elite who push tax breaks for the rich. These tactics are especially powerful if they fit with the preexisting perceptions in the audience’s mind.

With the emotional tension built up and identified with an out-group that has been properly denigrated and dehumanized, the propagandist can then impel the audience to action by giving them a way to relieve their tension. This almost always involves the real or symbolic destruction of the out-group. Real destruction can mean imprisonment, torture, killing, and even genocide. In symbolic destruction, the out-group is stigmatized in some way. Brown explains this process in terms of Freud’s ego defense mechanisms. The symbolic destruction involves projection, or characterizing the out-group as having the propagandist’s own weaknesses or sins. Conformity and identification permit large numbers of persons to follow a charismatic leader because they believe he or she is their voice. This sanctions whatever the leader decides to do.

Finally, propaganda is most likely to emerge in the modern state, in which individuals are isolated (as you may now feel if you are on a large campus), unknown, and helpless to control their own destiny. The supporters of many propagandistic mass movements are the uneducated or the unemployed—those who feel helpless and hence find the movement attractive because it promises change. Feelings of loneliness and isolation are countered by becoming a member of a group. The group offers individuals substitute identification and value. Further, a group, and especially a crowd, is likely to behave more emotionally than any single individual. Mob

psychology can take over, and violent acts (lynchings, riots, and so on) are committed in the hysteria. And because the group shares the guilt, no one individual need feel remorse. As Brown (1963) put it, “Each society has its own kind of circus and hopes that after the performance is ended, the participants will return less reluctantly to their dull round of daily life” (p. 73). Propaganda provides tickets to the circus for members of the mob.



To learn more about stereotyping, access InfoTrac College Edition, and enter the word “stereotype” in the search engine. Select the subdivisions and then the narratives option, and select the one titled “Burger Queen” by Erin Sharp. Relate to the class how differently Erin was treated when she told people that she was a student at Cornell University versus when she told them she worked at McDonald’s.

Particularly interesting are the ways in which the technology of film was used for propaganda purposes from its earliest years. A few of the titles of propaganda films during these early years give a feel for how they might have appeared. *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag*, produced during the Spanish American War in 1898, was nothing more than a flagpole flying the Spanish flag, whereupon it was torn down and the American flag raised in its stead; this spectacle had “sensational” effects on the audiences. During World War I, films such as *The Kaiser*, *The Beast of Berlin*, and *Battle Cry of Peace* (1915) showed Germans attacking and demolishing New York City. The most famous propaganda film of the early years was the Russian-produced *Potemkin* (1925), which justified the Bolshevik Revolution to the Russian people, most of whom couldn’t read but all of whom could look at a movie screen and see the brutality of the czar and his troops. This example recalls Meyrowitz’s observations about literacy and television: Media with simple access codes can be powerful in influencing people who have minimal or no literacy.

Radio, developing at the same time as film, became a propaganda medium early in the twentieth century. Lenin described it as a “newspaper without

paper . . . and without boundaries” and directed its development to communicate communist ideology to illiterate peasants at home and in other countries. Radio Tokyo began propaganda broadcasting in 1936. During World War II, the BBC was the major source of Allied propaganda. Soon thereafter, more than eighty nations were broadcasting some kind of radio propaganda. Radio as an economical and efficient propaganda technology has had a great impact in Third World countries, where it is not uncommon to see a peasant listening to a Walkman while plowing a field with oxen.

Although television has not been frequently used for direct propaganda, its impact in the area of “cultural imperialism” has been immense. Most Third World programming comes from the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. Each year the United States alone sells 150,000 hours of programming to other countries, conveying American values, fashions, and capitalist ideology. The programming area that is most propagandistic is news reporting, which has raised the issue of the “free flow” of information between the Western world and developing nations.

This brief history of how technological developments lead to increased and more efficient propaganda underscores what Jaques Ellul (1973) was saying: Propaganda is *la technique* that is “an indispensable condition for the development of technical progress and the establishment of a technological civilization” and “has become an inescapable necessity for everyone” (p. 95). One of the major myths put forward by *la technique* (the modern political technocracy) is that progress is always good—it is desirable to improve our products, our processes, our bodies, our minds, our lot in life, and a host of other things. You and I have no future without progress; that piece of propaganda is essential to us. At the same time, I know I should do something about the myth of progress—accept it, reject it, or something. Ellul suggested that most of us find ways to anesthetize our dependency (and *la technique* frequently supplies them): television, narcotics, family, alcohol, pleasure, the “me generation,” careers, sex, the Web, the cult of the self, and so on.

Ellul (1973) emphasized, however, that just because *la technique* is necessary doesn't mean it is therefore good and to be fostered. Rather,

necessity never establishes legitimacy; the world of necessity is a world of weakness, a world that denies man. To say that a phenomenon is necessary means, for me, that it denies man; its necessity is proof of its power, not proof of its excellence. However, confronted by a necessity, man must become aware of it if he is to master it. . . . Only when he realizes his delusion will he experience the beginning of genuine freedom—in the act of realization itself. (pp. xv–xvi)

Can we do this? Can we step back from our hectic culture and at least identify the many myths that keep us twitching? Ellul thought so; he said that the probable alternative is a life in which

man will be fully adapted to this technological society, when he will end by obeying with enthusiasm, convinced of the excellence of what he is forced to do, the constraint of the organization will no longer . . . be a constraint, and the police will have nothing to do. (p. xviii)

All propaganda, according to Ellul (1973), relies to some degree on one of two basic psychological devices: (1) the conditioned reflex (or the automatic, knee-jerk response), and (2) the democratic myth—“Let's put it to a vote!” Stereotypes such as that of the prissy English schoolboy, the emotional Italian, the authority-driven German, or the inscrutable Japanese might also be used to evoke conditioned responses. By a “myth,” Ellul meant “an all-encompassing image: a sort of vision of desirable objectives . . . [which] pushes a man to action precisely because it includes all he feels is good, just, and true” (p. 30). Examples might be the myths of race, progress, wealth, and productivity.

According to Ellul, both the conditioned reflex and the myth are part of a pre-propaganda phase in which people are prepared for action by being conditioned to accept the values of a culture. When the time comes for action, the leader or the “establishment” can prompt a reflex response by appealing to people's mythic beliefs. For example, our American culture treasures the myth of democracy, according to which the wisdom of the people, when operat-

ing in a democratic fashion, leads to the best decisions and will prevail. The assumption is that democracy, coupled with a free marketplace, will reverse the economic and political slavery experienced by other countries. Events seem to demonstrate that the answer isn't nearly that simplistic, yet our trust in the myth of democracy continues to lead us to recommend democracy as the "best" political system for other countries.

Another myth of *la technique* is that efficiency is good. As long as we buy the legitimacy of this myth, we are conforming with the propaganda of *la technique*. What does such conformity imply? What can we do about efficiency-related issues when we disagree? An interesting example is the inefficiency of the family farm. In the film *Country*, starring Jessica Lange and Sam Shepard, a young family trying to make it on a family farm in the 1980s must confront the myth of efficiency. Those who believe in the myth help the bureaucracy foreclose on the defaulted loans and dispose of family belongings at auctions. However, *la technique* is blunted by individual action and by rephrasing the questions implied by the myth. In *Country*, instead of asking of the family farm, "Will it work?" the heroine, Jewel Ivy, asks, "Is it a healthy way to bring up children? Is it a humane way to relate to other people?" Her questions turn the myth of efficiency on its head and ultimately lead the local administrator of the Farm Home Administration to quit his job rather than pursue the myth of efficiency by foreclosing on the Ivy farm. Nevertheless, *la technique* seems to work its will over the Ivys, when a bureaucrat from Washington supervises an auction of the Ivy's belongings, machinery, and tools. However, Jewel's son makes a critical action and statement as he bids all his savings on his grandfather's horse harnesses—the ultimate symbol of inefficiency in modern farming. This act spurs the rest of the crowd to recognize that it has been duped by the myth of efficiency. They refuse to cooperate in the auction and bid ridiculously low prices—seven cents for a combine, a dime for a tractor, and so on. The bureaucrat tries to reassert the myth by threatening to haul the belongings to another county to auction them. Jewel retorts, "When you try to auction off this land and get no bids, you can't take it to another Goddamned county!" *La technique* loses.

The same approach could be used with the many other myths we embrace: the myth of progress, the myth of pleasure, the myth of production, the myth of the individual, the myth of status, the myth of success. Are they humane? Healthy? Rewarding? These are the kinds of questions Ellul wants us to ask once we have identified the propaganda of *la technique*.



To learn more about Jaques Ellul, and especially about his concerns regarding technology, access InfoTrac College Edition, and enter the name "Ellul" in the search engine. Read the article that appears.

## EIGHT CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERN PROPAGANDA

Ellul's theories of propaganda were analyzed by Clifford Christians and Michael Real (1979). On the basis of their analysis, Ellul's work can be seen as revolving around eight central ideas that help identify the propaganda of *la technique*.

1. Propaganda is always associated with industrialized societies in which *la technique* (or the quest for ever more efficiency through technology) supersedes human social interaction.
2. Propaganda is not a set of tricks but an ongoing, ever-present, interrelated system of methods, technologies, or "techniques" that pervade modern society.
3. Propaganda inevitably occurs in societies in which people are depersonalized and unknowingly forced into groups or masses while being isolated as individuals. They derive their identity from the mass, which is united through propaganda.
4. The purpose of modern propaganda is not to agitate the masses to action but to integrate them into society. This is done through peer pressure, social norms, and collective standards—usually expressed by a leader.

5. International propaganda tends to come from “propaganda blocs” such as the United States, China, the Arab states, the Israelis, and the Third World. Propaganda is intended for internal consumption to calm, not agitate, the masses and can come from governments, corporations, political parties, or religious groups.
6. Propaganda in a highly technological society is totalitarian. Everything is infused with some element of a propagandistic message. Totalitarian propaganda also infuses our social interactions. We find flags in church, pledges of allegiance at the Lions Club, patriotic songs at school and church, and mealtime prayers in many homes.
7. Contemporary propaganda isolates the individual, stereotypes public opinion, and offers simplistic answers to complex social questions.
8. Propaganda in Ellul’s terms is everywhere. Our art and music—even antipatriotic and non-political art and music—identify our cultural values and beliefs. In fact, this book, which asks you to be a conscientious receiver of persuasion, would be but another example of propaganda if seen through Ellul’s eyes.

If all of this sounds negative and depressing, don’t be surprised. It is. In fact, this is one of the recurring criticisms of Ellul’s work—it offers so little hope and is so nihilistic. Ellul’s (1979) own words often prompt such criticism:

The individual is in a dilemma: either he decides to safeguard his freedom of choice . . . thereby entering into competition with a power against which there is no efficacious defense and before which he must suffer defeat; or he decides to accept a technical necessity, in which case he will himself be the victor, but only by submitting irreparably to technical slavery. In effect, he has no choice. (p. 84)

However, a closer reading of Ellul’s work and that of his critics reveals a position that is not totally hopeless. Ellul saw the solution in a three-step process (Christians & Van Hook, 1981). In stage 1, we recognize the existence and dangers of *la technique* in its many forms: bureaucracy, isolation of the

individual, and various myths. This phase also involves resisting standardization, whether imposed by the media, government, economic institutions, or some other force. Stage 2 involves the transformation of the self into a nontechnological human. This requires us to identify ways in which our lives can be changed. In Ellul’s view, we need to identify the ways in which we are influenced by the propaganda of *la technique* and reject as much technology as possible. Ellul was certain that realization of the dangers of *la technique*, coupled with disengagement from technology, would lead to stage 3—the action stage. Here, Ellul advocated “creative nonconformity . . . spontaneous movement . . . and tangible acts which *ipso facto* circumvent the socio-technological order” (1979, p. 154). He was not prescriptive about specific actions and instead urged a “passion to play,” or a return to festivals and rituals that emphasize humane values.

Even Ellul recognized that stage 3 is extremely difficult and potentially dangerous. For our purposes, realization, reflection, and then avoidance may suffice. If we accept Ellul’s ideas, asking humane questions of technological institutions seems to be the most promising action we can take. At least it has the potential of raising the consciousness of others in regard to the dangers of *la technique*.

## REVIEW AND CONCLUSION

Our interest in propaganda and its uses always appears during times of war or national crisis. At other times, our interest in propaganda diminishes, and we become more concerned with everyday events and with personal problems. Yet, as we have seen, the absence of war does not mean the absence of propaganda. A major difficulty arises in identifying just what propaganda is, what its sources and intent are, and how and why it affects us. Even if Ellul overstates his case, his theory is useful. It jars us. It forces us to look deeper—to take a second and even a third look at many of the things that are happening around us. In those second or third looks, we often can identify propaganda that we might otherwise have overlooked.

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. Are you being persuaded through a technique of which you are only dimly aware (for example, telemarketing)? If so, what is it?
2. What is the plain-folks device? Identify its use in several examples of persuasion.
3. What is card stacking? Identify uses of it.
4. What is the transfer device? Identify uses of it.
5. What is the glittering generalities device? Identify uses of it.
6. Which medium discussed by Jowatt and O'Donnell is the most underused for propaganda purposes? Which has the most potential?
7. Are any of the traditional American cultural values being urged on you? If so, can you identify the source of the urging?
8. Where in your world is the value of efficiency espoused? Look at advertisements, editorials, political campaigns, and so on.
9. In what ways do you agree and disagree with Jacques Ellul's ideas about propaganda?
10. What can we expect in the future regarding propaganda?

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