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# Propaganda

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"Propaganda becomes ineffective the moment we are aware of it"

--Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945)

"If consumers are aware that they are being propagandized, the choice to accept or reject the message is theirs alone."

--Jowett & O'Donnell, p154

"Good propaganda must keep well ahead of actual political events. It must act as a pacemaker to policy and mould public opinion, without appearing to do so."

--General Erich Ludendorff (1865-1937) (from Lasswell)

"The first casualty during war is truth"

--Attributed as old saying (Jowett & O'Donnell, p.10)

"The rank and file are more primitive than we imagine. Propaganda must therefore always be essentially simple and repetitious. In the long run only he will achieve basic results in influencing public opinion who is able to reduce problems to the simplest terms and who has the courage to keep forever repeating them in this simplified form despite the objections of intellectuals."

--Joseph Goebbels (from P&A)

"The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of these facts, all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan."

--Adolf Hitler (*Mein Kampf* Vol. 1 Ch. VI)

## What is Propaganda?

Propaganda is a message which attempts to alter public perceptions and/or induce action. It serves some specific agenda. Propaganda can appear in any form or medium and may or may not be obvious as propaganda. Its actual source may not be obvious. Not all propaganda is evil - some serves reasonable purposes, like promoting action on public health issues.

According to Lasswell (1927) "It refers solely to the control of opinion by significant symbols, or, to speak more concretely and less accurately, by stories, rumours, reports, pictures, and other forms of social communication. Propaganda is concerned with the management of opinions and attitudes by the direct manipulation of social suggestion rather than by altering other conditions in the environment or in the organism."

Jowett & O'Donnell's definition seems to be quite complete:

*"Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."*

Only the most dedicated skepticism and critical thinking can prevent propaganda from deceiving you. The first thing you must do is learn to detect propaganda. Remember: you are up against skilled professionals.

## **Propaganda in History**

It has been very interesting to discover the nature and extent of propaganda [usage in times past](#).

## **Why Study Propaganda?**

In this 21st century world propaganda is everywhere. Attempts to influence you in some way are found daily. We want to introduce the topic of propaganda because of the comment by Joseph Goebbels at the top of this page. Propaganda loses its effect the moment you become aware that whatever you are looking at is propaganda. We want you to begin building a toolkit that will allow you to recognize propaganda and act accordingly. This will take time; the subject of propaganda is large and complex. There is so much in it relating to sociology, psychology and communication that it might make a minor subject in a degree program.

Advertising is a form of propaganda; it is trying to influence you to purchase something. All kinds of images and symbols might be used, Extensive research has been done in trying to understand just how to influence the audience. Over the years, advertising has developed a reputation for being misleading, distorting and deceptive. Realization of this has produced skeptical consumers. Not all advertising is effective. Jowett and O'Donnell list one of the possible reasons for this as "...there might just be plain old skepticism, for after all, advertising has a long history of being deceptive or distorting."(p154) Advertising is also the largest source of propaganda today.

Consider the possibilities of the Internet. You can find almost anything you want out there. The net is filled with "information" sources, some providing reliable information and data that you can safely use, while others dispense opinion, half-truths, distortions and outright falsehoods. Conspiracy theories thrive and spread via the Internet. Who has the responsibility of sorting this out? You do.

Almost anything you see or hear could be propaganda, even items which, on the surface, do not appear to be so. The goal here is for you to begin the process of learning to identify propaganda, examining it, and THEN deciding rationally whether you want to accept the message.

## General Types of Propaganda

Propaganda can be categorized based on visibility or concealment of its source and/or the fact that the message is actually propaganda.

- "White" propaganda comes from an official source and is not disguised. It should be immediately recognizable as propaganda. Radio broadcasts from sources such as Radio Moscow, Voice of America, etc. are examples.
- "Grey" propaganda may be apparent as propaganda but its source will be hidden.
- "Black" propaganda is material whose content is not easily discerned as propaganda and whose source is completely concealed. Ellic Howe's book "The Black Game" tells stories of British efforts in black propaganda in WWII. Black propaganda includes all kinds of hoaxes and deceptions.

More recently, it was widely reported (early May 2011) that Facebook had hired a PR firm to anonymously circulate claims about Google. Investigation by two USA Today reporters found some of the claims true and some false. The agency, Burson-Marsteller, planted phony stories about a Google social networking plan. This incident is a current example of black propaganda.

## Principles of Propaganda

You might ask what makes any particular propaganda good or bad?

"Propaganda shows that it is good if over a certain period it can win over and fire up people for an idea. If it fails to do so, it is bad propaganda. If propaganda wins the people it wanted to win, it was presumably good, and if not, it was presumably bad. No one can say that your propaganda is too crude or low or brutal, or that it is not decent enough, for those are not the relevant criteria. Its purpose is not to be decent, or gentle, or weak, or modest; it is to be successful." (Joseph Goebbels, 1934 speech)

Propaganda is good if it works and bad if it does not. Goebbels' description is cold-blooded but accurate.

Take a look at [Goebbels' principles of propaganda](#).

Lasswell presents an assessment:

"Actual propaganda, wherever studied, has a large element of the fake in it. This varies from putting a false date on a despatch, through the printing of unverified rumours, the printing of denials in order to convey an insinuation, to the 'staging' of events. One of the world war fakes was the use of pictures of the Jewish pogrom of 1905, somewhat retouched, as fresh enemy atrocities." (Lasswell p. 206)

To the above we add Hitler's principles (from Jowett & O'Donnell).

- Avoid abstract ideas - appeal to the emotions.
- Constantly repeat just a few ideas. Use stereotyped phrases.
- Give only one side of the argument.
- Continuously criticize your opponents.
- Pick out one special "enemy" for special vilification.

These will be found in Volume I of *Mein Kampf*. Read them carefully, then see how they apply to the messages you hear today. Take any political message, dissect it, then see how it applies Hitler's principles.

"The function of propaganda does not lie in the scientific training of the individual, but in calling the masses' attention to certain facts, processes, necessities, etc., whose significance is thus for the first time placed within their field of vision.

The whole art consists in doing this so skillfully that everyone will be convinced that the fact is real, the process necessary, the necessity correct, etc. But since propaganda is not and cannot be the necessity in itself, since its function, like the poster, consists in attracting the attention of the crowd, and not in educating those who are already educated or who are striving after education and knowledge, its effect for the most part must be aimed at the emotions and only to a very limited degree at the so-called intellect.

All propaganda must be popular and its intellectual level must be adjusted to the most limited intelligence among those it is addressed to.

Consequently, the greater the mass it is intended to reach, the lower its purely intellectual level will have to be." (Hitler, *Mein Kampf* Vol. I Ch. 6)

Even knowing what Hitler was and did, we must admit that he got one thing right - propaganda. He had help - he learned from studying British and American WWI propaganda, which was quite successful. German propaganda in WWI was, according to Hitler, useless and "...its results all in all were zero."

Propaganda is effective because it works at an emotional level below the level of rational reasoning. The propagandist uses symbols, attitudes and morals that are embedded in the target audience. This is desirable because the emotional response can be deep, powerful, long-lasting and not rational. An intellectual, rational response is not desired and is not sought.

## **Properties of Propaganda**

From all the principles we have seen, we can distill an outline of the properties of propaganda.

- It will appeal to the emotions and avoid abstractions.
- It must be as simple as possible so everyone can understand it.
- The message may be reduced to a slogan.
- It will be constantly repeated.
- It will use stereotyped phrasing.

- It will give only one side of the story (you may have to dig to find out the other side).
- It will point out a "villain" to attack.
- It will incessantly criticize and attack its opponents.
- It will use distinctive phrases or slogans to label people or events.
- Whether something in the propaganda item is true or false is not important, as long as it is believed and works.
- The propaganda will evoke emotional responses from the people's own backgrounds.
- Cultural symbols will be used to obtain the emotional responses. Such symbols may be verbal or visual. Posters make great use of symbols.

If you examine some message and find these properties in it, you can be certain that it is propaganda. Another thing you can do is look for the seven devices identified by the [IPA](#) in the 1930s.

## Dissecting Propaganda

Once you have determined that a particular piece is probably propaganda, the next step is to dissect it completely to lay out what is in it. Identify the devices used in the attempt to influence. Extract the message (the "commodity") so you can see what the propagandist wants you to do. **Only then** can you decide whether you accept the message or not.

Lee advises: "*Do not commit yourself until you can learn what the commodity might be.*" Don't accept/believe a message until you determine:

- The ideology and the purpose of the message.
- [Who is presenting the message](#) (the propagandist/organization).
- [Who is paying for a message](#) (sometimes hard to discover).
- Whether the presenter is a [credible source](#).
- The context in which the propaganda appears.
- The target audience.
- Who benefits if you accept the message.
- [Why the options](#) are being given to you like this.
- What happens if you do something other than what the message recommends.
- How various distribution [media are used](#).
- Whether the arguments are [logically valid and fallacy free](#).
- [Whether the "facts" are actually correct](#) (sometimes hard to do).
- That the [statements/claims are clear](#), not terminally vague.
- What the [possibly deceptive/misleading devices](#) might be.
- Whether any [classic propaganda devices](#) are present.
- That you understand exactly [what any symbols mean](#).
- Who the [designated "villain"](#) is, if any.
- Whether the message features a [slogan](#).
- That you figure out what a slogan is supposed to mean.

So far it appears that critical analysis of a message involves closely questioning **every**

apparent fact, whether stated or implied, as well as **every** reason or argument given. A lot of propaganda involves distortion or outright falsehood. Also be careful about any assumptions you may make in interpreting the message. Cherry Picking is another important issue. Careful omission of critical information can produce significant bias and will be very hard to detect. Visual propaganda will often use symbols that are meaningful to the target audience. Both of these involve Assertion, or statements made as if factual. Also be very wary of slogans; they can have a very powerful effect without saying anything specific. What did "Change you can believe in" really mean?

If you get the idea that anything that might be propaganda must be carefully dissected and studied, you are right. Take nothing at face value. The only problem is that analysis of propaganda is a complex process requiring a lot of background and a lot of time.

## Last Thoughts

The subject of propaganda is so large that a one (or two!) semester course could be designed to study it. It contains large amounts of psychology, sociology, mythology, media usage, cultural awareness, and more. Even that might not be enough.

If you are really interested in how propaganda works and has worked, the book by Jowett and O'Donnell is recommended. It won't be a fast read, but you'll know a whole more when you finish than when you started.

For a social psychologist's take on propaganda, *Age of Propaganda:...* is excellent. The authors' insights will be very valuable.

In case you are wondering why we made significant references to a couple of Nazis, the reason is that the post-WWII authors we read cited them. It became obvious that, to understand 20th century propaganda, we would have to read Hitler and Goebbels. The worst thing about what we found is that these same principles are still being used on the people of the 21st century.

Finally, in this study we realized that propaganda is everywhere; practically every message you are exposed to is propaganda. Given the principles of propaganda, every such message is suspect. Given the volume of them that hits you, it's not possible to critically evaluate every one. The tendency, then, is to become totally cynical and refuse to believe any of them. This may prevent you from being misled but is not good for the nation as a whole. Imagine the consequences if the government tried to pass on some very important and truthful information and most people refused to believe them. There are good examples in the Vietnam War. We found no easy answers for this.

## References

The books listed below contain bibliographies which will provide pointers to even more useful references. Some of the web sites also contain a lot of good references. There are obviously more good books on the subject; the ones we list are those we have acquired for study.

- *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*; Anthony Pratkanis & Elliot Aronson
- *Propaganda and Persuasion*; Garth Jowett & Victoria O'Donnell
- *How to Understand Propaganda*; Alfred M. Lee; 1952
- *Propaganda Technique in the World War*; Harold D. Lasswell; 1927
- *Falsehood in Wartime*; Arthur Ponsonby, M.P.; 1928
- *How We Advertised America:...*; George Creel
- *Propaganda*; Edward Bernays; 1928
- *The Black Game*; Ellic Howe; 1982
- *Propaganda for War*; H.C. Peterson; 1939
- *Mein Kampf*; Adolf Hitler; Vol I Ch VI, Vol II Ch XI
- *Goebbels' Principles of Propaganda*, Leonard W. Doob, Public Opinion Quarterly, Fall 1950 pp. 419-442
- [Angelfire has on-line copy of Mein Kampf](#)
- [Excellent and comprehensive reference from Sourcewatch](#)
- [Direct link to Sourcewatch techniques index](#)
- [Deep archive of Nazi propaganda](#) from Calvin College
- [WWI Propaganda posters - good site](#)
- [WWI \(and WWII\) Propaganda posters](#)
- [More posters from the National Archives](#)
- [Posters from Calvin college archive](#)
- [WWI posters](#) (commercial site)
- [WWI posters from learnnc.org](#)
- [Principles of Propaganda](#) per Josef Goebbels
- [Propaganda](#) at propagandacritic.com
- [Recognizing Propaganda Technique](#) from Cuesta College
- [Propaganda techniques](#) with examples
- [Survey of propaganda](#) from historians.org
- [Types and examples of Propaganda](#) from Glendale Community College
- [Frontgroups.org](#) examines front groups and astroturf marketing
- [Propaganda techniques](#) from Thinkquest
- [Skepticsfieldguide](#) list of fallacies
- [Factcheck.org](#) is useful for fact-checking
- [Snopes.com](#) is VERY useful for fact checking.
- [Politifact](#) is another fact-checker
- [Urban Legends site](#)
- [Washington Post fact checker](#)
- [Truth or Fiction](#) is good for checking out email rants
- [Propaganda Techniques](#) from George Mason University
- [More on techniques from scribd.com](#)

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