

Semantics and Ethics of Propaganda

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□ *This article explores shifting definitions of propaganda, because how we define the slippery enterprise determines whether we perceive propaganda to be ethical or unethical. I also consider the social psychology and semantics of propaganda, because our ethics are shaped by and reflect our belief systems, values, and language behaviors. Finally, in the article I redefine propaganda in a way that should inform further studies of the ethics of this pervasive component of modern society.*

Shifting Perspectives on Propaganda

In this portion of the article I offer a brief overview of propaganda's definitional history. Students of ethics should be struck by certain commonalities among most (but certainly not all) of the traditional and a few of the contemporary definitions: a presumption of manipulation and control, if not outright coercion, that dehumanizes the audiences or intended "victims" of propaganda; a power imbalance—rhetorical, political, economic, and so forth—between propagandists and propagandees; and a presumption that principles of science, rhetoric, semantics, and enlightened or open-minded education serve as powerful antidotes to propaganda. More subtle, but perhaps as intriguing, are recent suggestions that propaganda is systemic in a democratic, technological, postindustrial information society and that instruments of mass media (in particular, advertising and public relations, and other tools of persuasion) are every bit as propagandistic as were totalitarian dictatorships of days gone by.

Early Approaches to Propaganda

One implication of the term *propaganda*, when it was first used in the sociological sense by the Roman Catholic Church, was to the spreading of ideas that would not occur naturally, but only via a cultivated or artificial generation. In 1622, the Vatican established the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, or "Congregation for the Propaganda of Faith," to harmonize the content and teaching of faith in its missions and consoli-

date its power. As Combs and Nimmo maintained (1993, p. 201), this early form of propaganda was considered by the Church to be a moral endeavor.

Over time the term took on more negative connotations; in a semantic sense, propaganda became value laden, and in an ethical sense, it was seen as immoral. In 1842 W. T. Brande, writing in the *Dictionary of Science, Literature and Art*, called propaganda something “applied to modern political language as a term of reproach to secret associations for the spread of opinions and principles which are viewed by most governments with horror and aversion” (Qualter, 1962, p. 4).

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Following World War I, R. J. R. G. Wreford (1923) maintained that propaganda had retained its pejorative connotations as “a hideous word” typical of an age noted for its “etymological bastardy” (Qualter, 1962, p. 7). At that time, the forces of propaganda, public relations, and psychological warfare had become inextricably intertwined in the public’s mind. Social scientists and propaganda analysts, strongly influenced by models of behaviorism, tended to depict a gullible public readily manipulated by forces over which it had little control (Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1937; Lee & Lee, 1988). This depiction offended humanists and progressives who feared propaganda as a threat to democracy and saw public enlightenment through education as the best defense against the inevitability of propaganda. (For a good treatment of this, see Michael Sproule, 1989 and 1997.) In 1929, for instance, Everett Martin wrote that

Education aims at independence of judgment. Propaganda offers ready-made opinions for the unthinking herd. Education and propaganda are directly opposed both in aim and method. The educator aims at a slow process of development; the propagandist, at quick results. The educator tries to tell people how to think; the propagandist, what to think. The educator strives to develop individual responsibility; the propagandist, mass effects. The educator fails unless he achieves an open mind; the propagandist unless he achieves a closed mind. (p. 145)

In a 1935 book, Leonard Doob drew a further distinction between education and propaganda by saying that

If individuals are controlled through the use of suggestion ... then the process may be called propaganda, regardless of whether or not the propagandist intends to exercise the control. On the other hand if individuals are affected in such a way that the same result would be obtained with or without the aid of suggestion, then this process may be called education, regardless of the intention of the educator. (p. 80)

Harold Lasswell (1927) offered the first attempt to systematically define propaganda to assure some degree of validity and reliability in studies of the phenomenon. Propaganda, Lasswell wrote, is "the control of opinion by significant symbols, or, so to speak, more concretely and less accurately, by stories, rumors, reports, pictures, and other forms of social communications" (p. 627).

A year later George Catlin (1936) defined propaganda as the mental instillation by any appropriate means, emotional or intellectual, of certain views. He said the "instillation of views may be animated by no strong sense of moral or political urgency," and that "it may amount to little more than the distribution of information, public acquaintance with which is advantageous to the institution concerned" (pp. 127–128).

The 1930s and 1940s saw propaganda's definitions reflecting social science's struggles between behaviorism (the "stimulus response" model) and a more value neutral stance. At the same time, propaganda was applied to increasingly broad categories of social and political phenomena.

Edgar Henderson (1943) proposed that no definition of propaganda can succeed unless it meets several requirements: (a) it must be objective; (b) it must be psychological, or at least sociopsychological, rather than sociological or axiological; (c) it must include all the cases without being so broad as to become fuzzy; (d) it must differentiate the phenomenon from both similar and related phenomena; and (e) it must throw new light on the phenomenon itself, making possible a new understanding and systematization of known facts concerning the phenomenon and suggesting new problems for investigation (p. 71). Given these criteria, Henderson claimed previous definitions fell short, and proposed that "propaganda is a process which deliberately attempts through persuasion-techniques to secure from the propagandee, before he can deliberate freely, the responses desired by the propagandist" (p. 83).

Doob (1948) defined propaganda as "the attempt to affect the personalities and to control the behavior of individuals toward ends considered unscientific or of doubtful value in a society at a particular time" (p. 240). Doob employed propaganda in a neutral sense "to describe the influence of one person upon other persons when scientific knowledge and survival values are uncertain," indicating that "propaganda is absolutely inevitable and cannot be exorcised by calling it evil-sounding names" (1948, p. 244).

Past Half Century

Following World War II, propaganda was often defined in accordance with constantly shifting perspectives on political theory and the processes/effects and structures/functions of mass communication. Some scholars, such as Alfred McClung Lee (1952), stubbornly held to earlier models of humanity-as-victim when defining propaganda as something that was vivid, emotional, and attempted to override common sense. Increasingly, however, as media and organized persuasion enterprises in and of themselves were seen to have diminished mind-molding influences, definitions (and, we presume, fears) of propaganda softened. Many of the midcentury explorations of propaganda considered the phenomena in terms of the totality of persuasive characteristics of a culture or society. More recently, definitions have incorporated concerns about subtle, long-term but difficult to measure media effects. Also, many modern approaches to the subject have allowed that propaganda need not necessarily be deliberately and systematically manipulative of consumers-cum-victims, but may merely be the incidental by-product of our contemporary technological and/or information society.

Terrence Qualter, in his 1962 book on propaganda and psychological warfare, called propaganda

The deliberate attempt by some individual or group to form, control, or alter the attitudes of other groups by the use of the instruments of communication, with the intention that in any given situation the reaction of those so influenced will be that desired by the propagandist. (p. 27)

Qualter (1962) argued that the phrase “the deliberate attempt” was the key to his concept of propaganda, because, as he claimed, he had established “beyond doubt” that anything may be used as propaganda and that nothing belongs exclusively to propaganda. The significance, he said, was that any act of promotion can be propaganda “only if and when it becomes part of a deliberate campaign to induce action through the control of attitudes” (p. 27).

French social philosopher Jacques Ellul (1964, 1965), whose ideas have significantly informed the propaganda research agenda in recent decades, held a sophisticated view construing propaganda as a popular euphemism for the totality of persuasive components of culture. Ellul (1965) saw a world in which numerous elements of society were oriented toward the manipulation of individuals and groups, and thereby defined propaganda as “a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and in-

corporated in an organization" (p. 61). Propaganda performs an indispensable function in society, according to Ellul (1965):

Propaganda is the inevitable result of the various components of the technological society, and plays so central a role in the life of that society that no economic or political development can take place without the influence of its great power. Human Relations in social relationships, advertising or Human Engineering in the economy, propaganda in the strictest sense in the field of politics—the need for psychological influence to spur allegiance and action is everywhere the decisive factor, which progress demands and which the individual seeks in order to be delivered from his own self. (p. 160)

Although recognizing the significance of the traditional forms of propaganda utilized by revolutionaries and the heavy-handed types of propaganda employed by despots and totalitarian regimes—"agitation" and "political" propaganda—Ellul (1965) focused more on the culturally pervasive nature of what he called "sociological" and "integration" propaganda. What Ellul (1965) defined as "the penetration of an ideology by means of its sociological context" (p. 63) is particularly germane to a study of mass media persuasion. Advertising, public relations, and the culturally persuasive components of entertainment media are all involved in the "spreading of a certain style of life" (p. 63), and all converge toward the same point.

In a sense sociological propaganda is reversed from political propaganda because in political propaganda the ideology is spread through the mass media to get the public to accept some political or economic structure or to participate in some action, whereas in sociological propaganda, the existing economic, political, and sociological factors progressively allow an ideology to penetrate individuals or masses. Ellul (1965) called the latter a sort of persuasion from within, "essentially diffuse, rarely conveyed by catchwords or expressed intentions" (p. 64). He added that it is instead "based on a general climate, atmosphere that influences people imperceptibly without having the appearance of propaganda" (Ellul, 1965, p. 64). The result is that the public adopts new criteria of judgment and choice, adopting them spontaneously, almost as if choosing them via free will—which means that sociological propaganda produces "a progressive adaptation to a certain order of things, a certain concept of human relations, which unconsciously molds individuals and makes them conform to society" (Ellul, 1965, pp. 63–64). In contemporary society this is a "long-term propaganda, a self-reproducing propaganda that seeks to obtain stable behavior, to adapt the individual to his everyday life, to reshape his thoughts and behavior in terms of the permanent social setting" (Ellul, 1964, p. 74).

It is significant to point out that those who produce sociological or integration propaganda often do so unconsciously, given how thoroughly (and perhaps blindly) they themselves are invested in the values and belief systems being promulgated. Besides, if one is an unintentional "integration" propagandist merely seeking to maintain the status quo, one's efforts would seem to be *prima facie* praiseworthy and educational. However, when considering propaganda as a whole, Ellul (1981) concluded that the enterprise was pernicious and immoral—a view shared by many but not all other students of the subject. Ellul (1981) argued that pervasive and potent propaganda that creates a world of fantasy, myth, and delusion is anathema to ethics because (a) the existence of power in the hands of propagandists does not mean it is right for them to use it (the is-ought problem); (b) propaganda destroys a sense of history and continuity and philosophy so necessary for a moral life; and (c) by supplanting the search for truth with imposed truth, propaganda destroys the basis for mutual thoughtful interpersonal communication and thus the essential ingredients of an ethical existence (Combs & Nimmo, 1993, p. 202; Cunningham, 1992; Ellul, 1981, pp. 159–177; Johannesen, 1983, p. 116).

Persuasion researcher George Gordon's (1971) eclectic definition of propaganda suggested that most teachers and most textbooks, except those involved in teaching abstract skills, are inherently propagandistic. (In his chapter on "Education, Indoctrination, and Training," Gordon argued that one failure of the American educational system is that there is not enough propaganda in the lower grades, and too much in graduate schools.)

John C. Merrill and Ralph Lowenstein (1971) published the first mass media textbook in the modern era that seriously analyzed propaganda and its employment in media. The authors Merrill generalized that from the numerous definitions of propaganda they had read they discerned certain recurring themes or statements or core ideas, among them "manipulation," "purposeful management," "preconceived plan," "creation of desires," "reinforcement of biases," "arousal of preexisting attitudes," "irrational appeal," "specific objective," "arousal to action," "predetermined end," "suggestion," and "creation of dispositions" (pp. 221–226). They concluded

It seems that propaganda is related to an attempt (implies intent) on the part of somebody to manipulate somebody else. By manipulate we mean to control—to control not only the attitudes of others but also their actions. Somebody (or some group)—the propagandist—is predisposed to cause others to think a certain way, so that they may, on some cases, take a certain action. (p. 214)

Notwithstanding the work of Gordon, Merrill, and a few others whose textbooks containing observations about propaganda were published in the 1970s, an honest appraisal of propaganda scholarship shows a void of

what Cunningham (2000) called “front-line academic research” between the 1950s and early 1980s. Cunningham (2000) went so far as to call propaganda a “theoretically undeveloped notion” during that period, and lauded the recent Ellulian-motivated resurgence of propaganda scholarship (p. 2). Some of that recent research and commentary (see especially Combs & Nimmo, 1993; Edelstein, 1997; Jowett & O’Donnell, 1999; Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992; Smith, 1989) has painted propaganda with a wider brush that covers the canvas of media, popular culture, and politics, and posits that propaganda need not necessarily be as systematic and purposive as earlier definitions demanded. Indeed, the likelihood of unconscious or accidental propaganda, produced by unwitting agents of the persuasion industry, makes the ethical analysis of contemporary propaganda ever more intriguing.

Consider only a few of the most recent definitions and discussions of propaganda (Cole, 1998). Ted Smith (1989), editor of *Propaganda: A Pluralistic Perspective*, called propaganda “Any conscious and open attempt to influence the beliefs of an individual or group, guided by a predetermined end and characterized by the systematic use of irrational and often unethical techniques of persuasion” (p. 80). Jowett and O’Donnell (1999) recently echoed that perspective, calling propaganda “The deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (p. 279). In Smith’s (1989) edited volume Nicholas Burnett (1989) defined propaganda simply as “discourse in the service of ideology” (p. 127).

Pratkanis and Aronson (1992), in *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, used the term *propaganda* to refer to “the mass persuasion techniques that have come to characterize our postindustrial society,” and “the communication of a point of view with the ultimate goal of having the recipient of the appeal come to ‘voluntarily’ accept this position as if it were his or her own” (p. 8).

Media scholar Alex Edelstein, in his 1997 book *Total Propaganda: From Mass Culture to Popular Culture*, said “old propaganda” is traditionally employed by the government or the socially and economically influential members in “a hierarchical mass culture, in which only a few speak to many,” (p. 5) and it is intended for “the control and manipulation of mass cultures” (p. 4). He contrasts this with the “new propaganda” inherent in a broadly participant popular culture “with its bedrock of First Amendment rights, knowledge, egalitarianism, and access to communication” (p. 5).

Social Psychology of Propaganda

Scholarly analyses of propaganda tend to focus on either the political or semantic/rhetorical nature of the beast. An equally intriguing set of in-

sights has been offered by social psychologists, concerned as they are with the nature of belief and value systems and the various psychological needs that a phenomenon such as propaganda tends to fulfill. Until recently, philosophers have been noticeably absent from the fray.

Throughout the 20th century, various schools of sociology and psychology (and, recently, the hyphenated pairing of the two) have concluded that propaganda is produced and consumed by individuals with particular sociopsychological characteristics. What Ellul (1965) has described as sociological and integration propaganda has been the focus of their attention, as it is ours.

The past half-century's concerns over media propaganda have been based on the often stated assumption that one responsibility of a democratic media system is to encourage an open-minded citizenry—that is, a people who are curious, questioning, unwilling to accept simple pat answers to complex situations, and so forth. Mental freedom, the argument goes, comes when people have the capacity, and exercise the capacity, to weigh numerous sides of controversies (political, personal, economic, etc.) and come to their own rational decisions, relatively free of outside constraints.

Open and Closed Mind

A growing body of research on perception and belief systems seems to be concluding that individuals constantly strive for cognitive balance as they view and communicate about the world, and that individuals will select and rely on information consistent with their basic perceptions. This holds true for mass media practitioners as well as for their audiences. A *Journalism Quarterly* study by Donohew and Palmgreen (1971), for instance, showed that open-minded journalists underwent a great deal of stress when having to report information they weren't inclined to believe or agree with because the open-minded journalists' self-concepts demanded that they fairly evaluate all issues. Closed-minded journalists, on the other hand, underwent much less stress because it was easy for them to make snap decisions consistent with their basic world views—especially because they were inclined to go along with whatever information was given to them by authoritative sources (Donohew & Palmgreen, 1971, pp. 627–39, 666).

Social psychologist Milton Rokeach (1960), in his seminal work *The Open and Closed Mind: Investigations Into the Nature of Belief Systems and Personality Systems*, concluded empirically that the degree to which a person's belief system is open or closed is the extent to which the person can receive, evaluate, and act on relevant information received from the outside on its own intrinsic merits, unencumbered by irrelevant factors in the situation

arising from within the person or from the outside (p. 57). To Rokeach (1960), open-minded individuals seek out sources (media and otherwise) that challenge them to think for themselves rather than sources that offer overly simplified answers to complex problems. Open-minded media consumers seek independent and pluralistic media because they value independence and pluralism—even, on occasion, dissonance—in their own cosmology, interpersonal relationships, and political life. Closed-minded or dogmatic media consumers, on the other hand, seek out and relish the opposite kinds of messages, taking comfort in simplified, pat answers (usually relayed by “authoritative sources”), in conformity, in a world in which the good guys and the bad guys are readily identifiable, in which there is a simplistic and direct connection between causes and effects (Rokeach, 1954, 1960, 1964).

Belief Systems and Media Propaganda

One of the dominant themes in media criticism for much of the past half century or so has been the tendency of media to mitigate against open-mindedness. Recent assessments reinforce the 1922 lamentations of Walter Lippmann concerning the stereotypical pictures in the heads of people, the incomplete reflections of political, economic, and social reality from which individuals make choices and public opinion is produced. If people lack time, opportunity, and inclination to become fully acquainted with one another and with their environment, it is only natural for them to act as Rokeach’s (1954, 1960, 1964) dogmatic, closed-minded media consumers—prompted and fulfilled by media whose stock in trade is production of such public opinion-molding propaganda.

There is, of course, an argument that people need media to provide them with predigested views because they can’t experience all of life firsthand. By definition, media come between realities and media consumers, and we are certainly not arguing for the elimination of those media. (Some have noted that online media and the Internet may appear to eliminate the mediating—and hence propagandistic—function of traditional media, but that argument falls when one considers that a prime reason to use new media is to pander to self-interest and to reinforce preexisting prejudices.)

The logic of Ellul (1965) is compelling in this regard, as he argued that people in a technological society need to be propagandized, to be “integrated into society” via media. As Ellul (1965) saw it, people with such a need get carried along unconsciously on the surface of events, not thinking about them but rather “feeling” them. Modern citizens, Ellul (1965) concluded, therefore condemn themselves to lives of successive moments, discontinuous and fragmented—and the media are largely responsible. The

hapless victims of information overload seek out propaganda as a means of ordering the chaos, according to Ellul (1965).

If our nature is to eschew dissonance and move toward a homeostatic mental set, the crazy quilt patterns of information we receive from our mass media would certainly drive us to some superior authority of information or belief that would help us make more sense of our world. Propaganda thus becomes inevitable.

Most of the foregoing emphasizes the propagandee's belief system, showing parallels between dogmatic personality types and the "typical" propagandee. Not much of a case has been made to maintain that propagandists themselves possess the basic characteristics of the dogmatist, but there is much evidence suggesting that communicators who are intentionally and consciously operating as propagandists recognize that one of their basic tasks is to keep the minds of their propagandees closed. The conscious propagandists can operate most successfully by raising themselves above their messages and goals, conducting propaganda campaigns as a master conductor plays with an orchestra. (As Eric Hoffer, 1951, reminded us, Jesus was not a Christian, nor was Marx a Marxist [p. 128].) Unconscious propagandists are another matter; they may have unconsciously absorbed the belief and value system that they propagate in their daily integration or socialization propaganda. Their unexamined propagandistic lives reflect a cognitive system that has slammed shut every bit as tightly as the authorities for whom they blindly "spin" and as the most gullible of their propaganda's recipients.

As Donohew and Palmgreen (1971) implied, it appears to be very difficult and stressful for both media practitioners and media consumers to retain pluralistic orientations. If people are not undergoing any mental stress, it may be that they aren't opening their minds long enough to allow belief discrepant information to enter. This is not to say that stress and strain in and of themselves make for open-minded media behavior. They may just make for confusion and result from confusion. However, if media personnel and audiences never find themselves concerned over contradictory information, facts that don't add up, opinions that don't cause them to stop and think, then they are being closed-minded purveyors and passive receivers of propaganda.

The Semantics of Propaganda

Most of the empirical findings of belief systems researchers are entirely consistent with the body of knowledge referred to as "general semantics," as both study how people perceive the world and how they subsequently communicate their perceptions or misperceptions. Numerous empirical studies of general semantics reinforce many of Alfred

Korzybski's (1948) original statements in *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, first published in 1933: that unscientific or Aristotelian assumptions about language and reality result in semantically inadequate or inappropriate behavior. Studies of children and adults trained in general semantics principles have demonstrated that semantic awareness results in such diverse achievements as improved perceptual, speaking, reading, and writing skills, generalized intelligence, and decreased prejudice, dogmatism, and rigidity (Black, 1974). These studies offer substantive refutation to early criticisms of general semantics as an overly generalized and pedantic system of gross assumptions about language behavior. From the studies emerge a series of semantic patterns typifying the semantically sophisticated or unsophisticated individual (many general semanticists refer to "sane" and "un-sane" behaviors, but those terms are fraught with semantic difficulties!). The patterns are highly reflective of Rokeach's (1954, 1960, 1964) typologies of the open-minded or closed-minded individual and of propaganda analysts' descriptions of the nonpropagandistic or propagandistic individual.

Highlighting general semanticists' descriptions of sophisticated (sane) language behavior are such concepts as

1. Awareness that our language is not our reality, but is an inevitably imperfect abstraction of that reality, and that tendencies to equate language and reality (through the use of the verb *to be* as an equal sign) are setting up false-to-fact relations. This is seen in the "intensionalized is-of-identity," and is to be replaced by "extensionalized" analysis and description of reality as we perceive it.

2. Awareness that the use of *to be* to describe something usually reveals more about the observers' projecting their biases than it does about the object described. This is seen as the "intensionalized is-of-predication" and is to be replaced by extensionalized awareness of our projections.

3. Awareness that people and situations have unlimited characteristics, that the world is in a constant process of change, that our perceptions are limited, and that our language cannot say all there is to be said about a person or situation. This is seen in attempts to replace a dogmatic "allness orientation" with a multivalued orientation that recognizes the "etc.," or the fact that there is always more to be seen and observed than we are capable of seeing, observing, and describing.

4. Awareness that a fact is not an inference and an inference is not a value judgment, and subsequent awareness that receivers of our communications need to be told the differences.

5. Awareness that different people will perceive the world differently, and we should accept authority figures', sources', and witnesses' view-

points as being the result of imperfect human perceptual processes and not as absolute truth.

6. Awareness that persons and situations are rarely if ever two valued, that propositions do not have to be either "true" or "false," specified ways of behaving do not have to be either "right" or "wrong," "black" or "white," that continuum-thinking or an infinite-valued orientation is a more valid way to perceive the world than an Aristotelian two-valued orientation (Korzybski, 1948; see also *Etcetera: A Review of General Semantics*, a quarterly published by the International Society for General Semantics, now in its 58th year of publication).

Numerous other semantic formulations exist, but these six can begin to offer a framework for semantic analysis of propaganda. As noted earlier, awareness and conscious application of these formulations have resulted in empirically improved levels of perception, reading, writing, speaking, generalized intelligence, and open-mindedness. Also, as in the case of being open-minded, it can be seen that being semantically sophisticated (sane) is not the easiest way to go through life because it tends to result in a mass of often contradictory perceptions and language behavior that the semantically unsophisticated (un-sane) individual never has to worry about. But such is the responsibility of the ethical, professional communicator, and the fate of the mature media consumer. As the Institute for Propaganda Analysts maintained 60 years ago, being a sophisticated consumer of propaganda, remaining aware of how propaganda is structured, and knowing how to respond to its various truth claims are crucial to the public welfare.

Propaganda Revisited

At this juncture, insights from propaganda analysts, media critics, social psychologists, and semanticists can be amalgamated into reasonably objective insights into the propagandistic nature of contemporary society. The insights can be applied to the producers of propaganda, the contents of propaganda, and the consumers of propaganda.

The emerging picture of propagandists/propaganda/propagandees and their opposites, as uncovered by the preceding discussions, reveals several definite patterns of semantic/belief systems/ethical/and so forth behavior. Note that on one hand the dogmatist (typical of propagandist and propagandee, and revealed in the manifest content of propaganda) seeks psychological closure whether rational or not; appears to be driven by irrational inner forces; has an extreme reliance on authority figures; reflects a narrow time perspective; and displays little sense of discrimination among fact/inference/value judgment. On the other hand, the nondogmatist faces a constant struggle to remain open-minded by evalu-

ating information on its own merits; is governed by self-actualizing forces rather than irrational inner forces; discriminates between and among messages and sources and has tentative reliance on authority figures; recognizes and deals with contradictions, incomplete pictures of reality, and the interrelation of past, present, and future; and moves comfortably and rationally among levels of abstraction (fact, inference, and value judgment).

Whereas, creative communication accepts pluralism and displays expectations that its receivers should conduct further investigations of its observations, allegations, and conclusions, propaganda does not appear to do so.

The preceding typologies help lead us to an original synopsis of propaganda, one meeting the criteria laid down by Henderson in 1943. It is sociopsychological, broad without being fuzzy, differentiates propaganda from similar and related phenomena, and sheds new light on the phenomena. In addition, it describes the characteristics of the propagandists, the propaganda they produce, and the propagandees—something sorely lacking in most other definitions. The synopsis is as follows:

Although it may or may not emanate from individuals or institutions with demonstrably closed minds, the manifest content of propaganda contains characteristics one associates with dogmatism or closed-mindedness; although it may or may not be intended as propaganda, this type of communication seems noncreative and appears to have as its purpose the evaluative narrowing of its receivers. Whereas creative communication accepts pluralism and displays expectations that its receivers should conduct further investigations of its observations, allegations, and conclusions, propaganda does not appear to do so. Rather, propaganda is characterized by at least the following six specific characteristics:

1. A heavy or undue reliance on authority figures and spokespersons, rather than empirical validation, to establish its truths, conclusions, or impressions.

2. The utilization of unverified and perhaps unverifiable abstract nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and physical representations rather than empirical validation to establish its truths, conclusions, or impressions.

3. A finalistic or fixed view of people, institutions, and situations divided into broad, all-inclusive categories of in-groups (friends) and out-groups (enemies), beliefs and disbeliefs, and situations to be accepted or rejected in toto.
4. A reduction of situations into simplistic and readily identifiable cause and effect relations, ignoring multiple causality of events.
5. A time perspective characterized by an overemphasis or underemphasis on the past, present, or future as disconnected periods rather than a demonstrated consciousness of time flow.
6. A greater emphasis on conflict than on cooperation among people, institutions, and situations.

This synopsis encourages a broad-based investigation of public communications behavior along a propaganda–nonpropaganda continuum. Practitioners and observers of media and persuasion could use this definition to assess their own and their media’s performance (Black, 1977–1978).

The definition applies to the news and information as well as to entertainment and persuasion functions in the media. Many criticisms of the supposedly objective aspects of media are entirely compatible with the aforementioned standards. Meanwhile, because most people expect the advertisements, public relations programs, editorials, and opinion columns to be nonobjective and persuasive, if not outright biased, they may tend to avoid analyzing such messages for propagandistic content. However, because those persuasive messages can and should be able to meet their basic objectives without being unduly propagandistic, they should be held to the higher standards of nonpropaganda. (For what it’s worth, persuasive media that are propagandistic, as defined herein, would seem to be less likely to attract and convince open-minded media consumers than to reinforce the biases of the closed-minded true believers, which raises an intriguing question about persuaders’ ethical motives.)

Conclusions

We are not suggesting that the necessity for mediating reality and merchandising ideas, goods, and services inevitably results in propaganda. Far from it. Yet we do suggest that when there is a pattern of behavior on the part of participants in the communications exchange that repeatedly finds them dogmatically jumping to conclusions, making undue use of authority, basing assumptions on faulty premises, and otherwise engaging in inappropriate semantic behavior, then we can say they are engaging in propaganda. They may be doing it unconsciously. They may not be attempting to propagandize, or ever be aware that their efforts can be seen as propagandistic, or know that they are falling victim to propaganda. It may just be that their

view of the world, their belief systems, their personal and institutional loyalties, and their semantic behaviors are propagandistic.

But this doesn't excuse them.

It is sometimes said, among ethicists, that we should never attribute to malice what can be explained by ignorance. That aphorism certainly applies to propaganda, a phenomenon too many observers have defined as an inherently immoral enterprise that corrupts all who go near it. If instead we consider propaganda in less value-laden terms, we are better able to recognize ways all participants in the communications exchange can proceed intelligently through the swamp, and we can make informed judgments about the ethics of particular aspects of our communications rather than indicting the entire enterprise.

It is possible to conduct public relations, advertising, and persuasion campaigns, plus the vast gamut of informational journalism efforts, without being unduly propagandistic.

In a politically competitive democracy and a commercially competitive free enterprise system, mass communication functions by allowing a competitive arena in which the advocates of all can do battle. What many call *propaganda* therefore becomes part of that open marketplace of ideas; it is not only inevitable, but may be desirable that there are openly recognizable and competing propagandas in a democratic society, propagandas that challenge all of us—producers and consumers—to wisely sift and sort through them.

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A fully functioning democratic society needs pluralism in its persuasion and information, and not the narrow-minded, self-serving propaganda some communicators inject—wittingly or unwittingly—into their communications and which, it seems, far too many media audience members unconsciously and uncritically consume. Open-mindedness and mass communications efforts need not be mutually exclusive.

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