

Free Speech and Propaganda

Without freedom of thought, there can be no such thing as wisdom – and no such thing as public liberty without freedom of speech.

– Benjamin Franklin

James Alcock

The freedom of speech that we all cherish carries with it a heavy responsibility. Responsibility not to cry “fire” in a crowded theatre. Responsibility not to incite hatred of others. Responsibility not to exploit the vulnerable. Yet, for those who feel no such sense of responsibility, the power of speech to provoke emotion, change belief and motivate behaviour leads to the employment of propaganda to further political goals.

Skilled and charismatic propagandists convert people to their causes by stimulating existing prejudices, promoting us-versus-them identification, targeting enemies, and offering simplistic solutions to problems that they themselves identify. The aim is to arouse emotion and divert people from critical thought. It is not only *what* is said that determines if propaganda will be successful, but also *how* it is said and *who* says it. The same words uttered by a Winston Churchill, a Pierre Trudeau, a Barack Obama or a Donald Trump may fall on deaf ears when delivered by a less able orator. In addition to what is said, how it is said and who says it, the nature of the audience is important. As social philosopher Eric Hoffer observed, “The gifted

propagandist brings to a boil ideas and passions already simmering in the minds of his hearers.”

Media truth and propaganda

Many long-established newspapers and magazines are struggling to survive, while Internet sites, web blogs and social media, along with talk shows in the 500-channel TV universe, are becoming the prime sources of information and news for many people, especially the young. Those sources vary considerably in quality and reliability, making it increasingly difficult to separate fact from fiction, or to distinguish truth from propaganda.

Propaganda, the deliberate attempt to modify our perceptions, beliefs and actions to suit the aims of the propagandist, has been employed in one form or another throughout recorded history. However, the term itself dates from 1622 when Pope Gregory XV instituted the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* whose task it was to *propagate* the Christian truth. Thus, the term originally carried a positive connotation, referring to the dissemination of what was believed to be truth. Over time, the meaning of

the term expanded to include the spreading of lies, and now, as a result of the Nazis' use of virulent propaganda to incite hatred and violence towards Jews, homosexuals, and other targeted minorities, the word has only a negative connotation.

While the persuasive orator (think Hitler, Mussolini, Peron, and whichever modern despot may come to mind) provides the finest example of the power of speech to move crowds, manipulate beliefs and motivate behaviours, propaganda in written or graphic form can also serve this purpose well. Lurid propaganda posters have long been employed during times of war to whip up animosity towards the enemy while building support for the war effort. Propaganda leaflets have been used to tempt enemy soldiers to surrender. And propaganda posters falsely extolling the virtues of an autocratic leader are routinely used in the attempt to bolster respect for and obedience to the demagogue.

What does psychology tell us about how we react to propaganda?

Psychological research has revealed a number of important factors that influence the impact of propaganda:

Default bias

Research clearly shows that we automatically accept new information as true, and then only as a second step do we assess its credibility. This is generally adaptive for basic survival. For example, when someone shouts a warning that a dangerous animal is on the loose, the costs associated with taking flight when the information is false are relatively small. On the other hand, taking the time to critically assess this information may prove fatal. Of course, propagandists do their best to divert us from taking that second step of critically evaluating the information they provide.

Source credibility

Often, we have little to go on when assessing the accuracy of information, and of

necessity we base our appraisal on the perceived credibility of its source. For example, Americans who put their trust in Fox News necessarily develop quite a different view of the political universe than someone who relies on CNN or PBS.

Given the importance of the source in terms of establishing credibility, propagandists sometimes try to fool people about the origins of their messages. Consider, for example, astroturfing in which the illusion of grassroots public support for a cause, policy or product is created. In one such instance, Americans for Prosperity presented itself as a grassroots movement in the United States that was opposed to so-called Obamacare. Yet, that organization was in reality a political action group set up by and funded by the conservative billionaire Koch brothers. It was artificial grassroots – AstroTurf.

Illusory truth effect

Research clearly shows that the more a message is repeated, the more likely it will come to be judged as true even when it is not. This is well-understood by advertisers, and they know that the irritation produced by their repetitive and banal advertisements on radio or television will be more than compensated for by the resulting increase in the credibility of the message. All propagandists recognize the power of repetition to elevate the influence of messages that might at first be deemed not credible.

Continued influence effect

The retraction of false or incorrect information does not reset belief to where it was beforehand. There is a lingering influence. (Think for instance of someone who has been accused of abusing children. When it is subsequently announced that the accusation was in error, would you be as ready to hire that person to babysit your child as you might have been prior to the retracted accusation?) As the saying goes, once rung, you cannot unring the bell. Propagandists take advantage of this effect through making accusations that they fully know will later be shown to be false.

Motivated cognition

When information is ambiguous, we tend towards interpretations in line with what we wish to be true. For example, one hears that several protesters ended up in hospital following a confrontation with police. In the absence of other information, people who are strongly supportive of “law and order” are more likely to assume that the police were just doing their job when faced with an unruly mob, while those holding a more critical view of the police are more likely to interpret this news as an instance of police brutality. Propagandists exploit motivated cognition by emphasizing the interpretation that best suits their purposes.

Hitler: master propagandist.

Adolf Hitler anticipated these and other findings about persuasion. Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels relied heavily on ideas promoted in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. Hitler wrote that:

- Propaganda fails unless one fundamental principle is kept in mind: confine it to a few points and *repeat them over and over* – the *illusory truth effect*.

- Avoid abstract ideas. Use stereotyped phrases and avoid objectivity. Find the psychologically correct way to arouse the emotions of the masses. (Think of the use of a modern political phrase such as “drain the swamp” in this context.) This exploits the default bias and diverts people from critical evaluation of the message.

- Constantly criticize enemies of the state, and focus on a particular enemy for special vilification. (Consider contemporary phrases such as “lock her up” and “build the wall.”)

- Never allow the public to cool off.

- Never admit a fault or wrong.

- Employ *Große Lüge*, the “Big Lie.” A truly colossal lie becomes believable because people assume that no one would dare to distort the truth to such a blatant degree.

And Hitler also anticipated the *continued influence effect*. He wrote in *Mein Kampf* that “the grossly impudent lie always leaves traces

behind it, even after it has been nailed down [as false], a fact which is known to all expert liars in this world and to all who conspire together in the art of lying.”

The similarities between these tactics and those of one contemporary political leader in particular are both obvious and striking.

Propaganda has been used by dictators of all stripes and, without it, their ascension to and grip on power would have been seriously compromised. It has been pointed out that one cannot truly understand the nature of the regime that the Bolsheviks created in Russia unless one understands the kind of propaganda they employed (Kenez, 1985). Vladimir Lenin’s propaganda tactics included among others:

- Demonize your opponents. Refer to them as “saboteurs,” “hoarders,” and “Kulaks” (prosperous peasant farmers).

- Blame your predecessor for major ongoing problems. Lenin blamed Czar Nicholas II for economic problems that resulted from his own government’s policies.

- Never waste a crisis. Find a way to use it to your advantage.

- Co-opt terminology that might be used against you. For example, in response to charges of not being democratic, Lenin proclaimed that “democracy is indispensable to socialism.”

Fake news

President Trump’s mantra of *fake news* is heard over and over these days. There are two aspects of fake news that propagandists exploit: making false news seem genuine and making genuine news seem false. As examples of the former, Iranian propagandists set up what looked to be a genuine BBC news website which they then used to disseminate false news that bore the credibility associated with the BBC (*Forbes Magazine*, February 28, 2018). And a fake ABC News page came online in December 2016 bearing a news report entitled, “Obama signs executive order banning Pledge of Allegiance in schools,” accompanied by a photograph of Obama signing a document with White House officials gathered round him. The news is false,

but more likely to be believed because of its apparent source.

Even the revered Benjamin Franklin, the man who championed free speech, was not beyond generating false news. On March 12, 1782, he published a counterfeit issue of the *Boston Independent Chronicle* in which it was reported that Indians were scalping colonists under the direction of King George III. Franklin's goal was to foment anger towards the British Crown and ultimately fuel revolution.

In modern times, mass media and social media provide powerful tools for engineering large-scale belief change. Photographs, sound bites and video clips bring extra power to the messages. While most people are aware that photographs need to be viewed with caution because of the ability to alter them with programmes such as Photoshop, a new and greater threat to truth and democracy is taking shape in the form of what are known variously as “deep fake videos” or “deep video portraits.” By using “deep learning,” a form of artificial intelligence, to scan facial expressions and movements in the videos of a public figure, it is now possible to create a video of the person saying things – in his or her own voice – that he or she never said. This adds a frightening new arrow to the quiver of propagandists everywhere.

The second form of fake news is to make genuine news seem false. Hitler championed this tactic, recognizing that propaganda is most effective when people do not trust the traditional press. As he was consolidating his grip on Germany, he referred to elements of the press that were critical of his actions – typically Jewish, Communist and foreign press – as the *Lügenpresse*, the “lying press.” Of course, it is the same tactic that has been introduced into American politics by Donald Trump.

Propaganda works!

Propaganda often succeeds in changing people's beliefs, actions and allegiances. Part of the reason for its success is that we all are poor at detecting lies, and this leaves us vulnerable to well-packaged deceit. (Even customs agents,

police, judges, psychologists and others who presume that they can detect falsehoods rarely do better than chance when put to a careful test.)

Some are hopeful that younger people, with their vast experience with social media and the internet, will be less easily taken in by fake news. However, research findings are not encouraging. For example, in a large U.S. study of middle-school, high-school, and college students, most mistook fraudulent news reports for fact, and articles labelled “sponsored news content” for journalism.

Not only are people vulnerable to being fooled by fake news, they are more likely to repeat it to others. A study of “rumour cascades” on Twitter during the decade 2006 – 2017 found that false news was 70 percent more likely to be retweeted than the truth (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). This is because false news is generally more sensational than truth, and people like to inform their friends of surprising information.

What can we do about it?

Propaganda is destructive not just because of the false information it disseminates, but perhaps even more important because it promotes distrust of responsible news sources and arouses emotion that does not yield to reason.

There is no easy fix, but there are a few approaches to countering propaganda worthy of consideration:

Forewarning

When propaganda can be detected in a timely manner, the public can be forewarned. For example, during the Second World War, Allied governments used poster campaigns to urge people not to fall for enemy propaganda. However, in those days, propaganda channels were few and propaganda was easier to spot. In modern times, the problem is much more complex because there are so many different media channels, information is delivered so quickly, and skilled propagandists make timely detection difficult. Some argue that it will be possible to use artificial intelligence for automatic detec-

tion in future, but it is doubtful that this will offer a complete solution.

Counterpropaganda

Countering false claims can be effective, but there is always the risk that the effort will fail and result instead in perpetuating the rumours and false news that it is aimed to defeat. There is also the danger of a *backfire effect*: denial can lead to a strengthening rather than a weakening of the false belief, for some will interpret denial as an indication that there is something to hide.

Focus on truth

Research shows that it is usually more effective to communicate truth than to challenge lies. That is, instead of refuting the message, provide the target audience with an alternative, the truth, and get the truth out first when possible. It is instructive that while German propaganda initially worked well on the home front, the propaganda efforts directed towards Britain were a terrible failure. William Joyce, an Irish-American Nazi sympathizer who broadcast propaganda from Germany to England, became a laughingstock, dismissively referred to as Lord Haw Haw. On the other hand, the BBC made the deliberate decision to broadcast only truth to the German citizenry, even though that meant at times broadcasting news of Allied losses as well as victories. Ultimately, the German populace came to trust the BBC as a reliable source of information in contrast to the propaganda they were receiving from their own government.

Critical thinking

The ultimate defence against propaganda is encouraging the critical analysis of information. Although it has become almost a cliché to tout the teaching of critical-thinking skills as a panacea, this has to be a major part of the solution.

In defence of free speech

As Benjamin Franklin warned, without free speech there can be

no true liberty. Lovers of liberty must stand on constant guard to protect our right to say what we want, when we want, to whom we want. And yet, an unbridled right to free speech also gives license to propagandists and demagogues who seek nothing less than to take such liberty away. While we celebrate our freedom to say what we want, it is important to remember that unchallenged lies and propaganda are instruments that can enslave us. •

James Alcock is Professor of Psychology at Glendon College, York University. He is a Member of the College of Psychologists of Ontario, a Fellow of the Canadian Psychological Association, and is a long-serving member of the Executive Committee of the international Committee for Skeptical Inquiry.

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