May 17th, 9:00 AM - May 19th, 5:00 PM

Philosophizing Propaganda

Stanley B. Cunningham
University of Windsor

Title: Philosophizing Propaganda
Author: Stanley B. Cunningham
Response to this paper by: R. Marlin
© 2001 Stanley B. Cunningham

The Problem: Background and History

Jowett (1987, 100-01) identifies two frustrations that have plagued the history of propaganda analysis: (i) a lack of clear agreement upon what propaganda is; and (ii) the unsystematic and unfocussed character of most propaganda studies. The second of these frustrations has been partly remedied by a growing volume of theoretically enhanced publications since 1980. The first of Jowett's two deficits, however, still plagues propaganda analysis. In what has been called "the century of propaganda" and the "age of propaganda" (Foulkes, 1983, 1; Herman, 1992; Pratkanis and Aronson, 1991; Wilkes, 1998, 1-2) a great deal of confusion--and even incoherence--surrounds the notion. Indeed, some have questioned, and others deny the very utility of the idea of propaganda. I argue in this paper that much of this theoretical disarray is traceable to a history of inadequate notions of propaganda, and that philosophical analysis greatly enhances our understanding of propaganda by disclosing its epistemological foundations.

Most of us already have what philosophers call a 'notion', a notional understanding or broad impression of what 'propaganda' stands for. Such an impression would include many or most of the following features: self-serving reports; lies, distortions, fabrications, exaggerations, bullshit; disinformation; selective disclosures and censorship; "spin" or spin-doctoring, loaded words, slanted language; mass persuasion, belief manipulation, impression management, ideological injection, bias; public relations [PR]; much or most advertising, campaign rhetoric, and probably more than a little education; religious discourse; rumors and gossip. Many of us probably assume that behind the scenes, controlling the message's content, are groups and individuals who are cunningly adept at directing all these messages to mass, faceless audiences which are, to a considerable degree, porous, highly impressionable, supine. At the same time, however, more than a few of us like to think that, in our own mind, we are relatively impervious to most of these persuasive strategies--or at least not as susceptible as others. (However, beware! Ellul [1973, 76, 111, 113] claims that intellectuals and the educated are especially susceptible to its influence.)

Propaganda as we have come to know it really began with World War I. Before the term was used infrequently (and this is why Ellul [1967, 5] is insistent that propaganda is really a 20th century phenomenon.) However, its spin-off, propaganda analysis and commentary, quickly attained a critical mass by the early 1930s. Most of this literature is dedicated to propaganda history including manifold case studies of wartime practices, persuasion techniques, and psychological studies of persuasion effects. While brief descriptions and definitions of propaganda abound, there have been relatively few treatments that essay, in any kind of systematic fashion, to lay out the idea or concept of propaganda. On the contrary, most accounts either assume that the reader already understands the term, or they tend to posit some relatively undeveloped, *ad hoc* notions, and then go on from there to describe this or that instance of propaganda. Sometimes a book will include 'propaganda' in its title without ever pausing to supply a description of the term or protocols for its use (e.g., Keshen, 1996); and this lapse only serves as one more indication that there has been a noticeable paucity of dedicated theoretical treatments of propaganda.

The enduring confusion about propaganda was articulated in a colloquium authored a dozen years ago by the editors of *Propaganda Review* entitled "What is Propaganda Anyway?" (Darnovsky et al., 1989) The colloquium took off from the premises that "propaganda is a slippery concept, difficult to define", and that "propaganda has lost much of its meaning" (pp. 6-7). What is just as interesting about this kind of exercise and a few others like it, moreover, is that the propaganda theorists who have set themselves to wrestle with the challenge have not allowed themselves to be discouraged by the concept's elusiveness. They have simply assumed that getting clear about the notion is part of their task. Much more uncomfortable than complaints about the broadness of the concept, however, is the charge that the value of the idea of propaganda is, at best, secondary to that of ideology (Selucky, 1982), or that it lacks any utility and substance (Allen, 1993; Rohatyn, 1988).

Psychologizing Propaganda

In a series of exemplary historical studies, Sproule (1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1994, 26-32; 1997) has shown that one way to repudiate the concept of propaganda was by gradually minimizing it and then ignoring it. One of the ways this was done was through "the scientific response"—concentrating, that is, upon experimental, observational and survey studies of persuasion effects, to the exclusion of reformist and humanist social concerns which had originally motivated the scientific examinations. Impressed by the obvious impact of WWI propaganda, early social-science researchers (in the fields of psychology, sociology and political science) undertook manifold series of effects studies. Not surprisingly, the language and methods of psychology dominated these early research and theorizing studies. This kind of scientific 'operationalization' which concentrated upon measurable effects succeeded in shifting attention away from the broader canvas of propaganda--in effect, denying its very existence both as a complex social phenomenon and, a fortiori, its utility as an interpretive idea. [1]

There were other transforming influences as well. During the 1940s and early 1950s, as the quest for mobilizing public opinion and securing social consensus grew within the American military, government and corporate sectors, the media and mass communication came to be increasingly viewed as benign instruments of democracy. By contrast, the earlier (admittedly, alarmist) style of propaganda analysis among humanist scholars and writers (including John Dewey, Walter Lippmann and Upton Sinclair) which had always viewed propaganda as anti-democratic, became itself suspect because it was now seen as an obstacle to social unity and conformity through the credo of influential *communication*. Sproule (1989b) writes: "the 1940s saw a consensus emerge that *propaganda analysis was dangerous* because of its socially divisive tendencies. Reflecting the new era of consensus, academic researchers on social influence turned, after 1939, from problems of helping the public analyze propaganda to the imperative of assisting governmental institutions fight propaganda battles abroad and at home" (p. 237, italics

---

1 Sproule (1989b) shows that the myth of the "magic-bullet" has grown up around these early research developments. The myth posits both powerful media effects and a kind of pure empirical intent behind these early research enterprises, an intent that overlooks the underlying socio-ethical and reformist motives that spurred many of these early scientific researchers. In any case, the magic-bullet myth has done much to reinforce these transformations: it did much to denigrate the reputation of earlier humanistic-style propaganda analysis and, over several decades, it served to steer American students of communication studies into other research directions, including, one might add, a later (and reactive) preoccupation with ideology and hegemony.

added). Small wonder, then, that propaganda studies, with occasional exceptions (e.g., Ellul, 1957;1973 [1965]), disappeared for as long as it did from front-line academic research between the 1950s and the 1980s. Sproule (1994, 1) remarks upon "the disappearance of propaganda as a significant theoretical term in American social sciences and its replacement with the more euphemistic concepts of communication and persuasion."

Contributing to this reduced visibility was propaganda's status as a theoretically undeveloped notion, a deficit that is still evident in the recently published *Encyclopedia of Propaganda* (Cole, 1998): the propaganda theory section (vol. 3, 615-18) does little more than to briefly annotate what have now become conventional transmission-models of communication in the language of stimulus-response, powerful and limited effects, uses and gratifications, and measurable attitude-change--all heavily psychologically structured.

Psychological imperialism could already be glimpsed in the title of Biddle's 1931 article, "A Psycholgical Definition of Propaganda". But its full force was made explicit in another article, "Towards a Definition of Propaganda" (1943), when its author, Henderson, remarked that the definition of propaganda must move away from the practice of positing what he called "content definitions" that tended to be largely intuitive in what they selected as *definientes*. Henderson insisted that a satisfactory definition had to meet two requirements. First, it "*must he psychological, or at least socio-psychological,* rather than sociological or axiological" ; second, the "definition must look to method as the differentiating factor and *must apply the term propaganda to a method, not a content"* (pp. 71, 74; italics added). Henderson's eagerness to link propaganda analysis to method is certainly commendable. At the same time, however, it's apparent that the method Henderson had in mind should be one that would disclose the dynamics of persuasion by identifying the psychological features involved in pressuring the "victim" to "come across" in the shortest possible time.

Overt preference for the methods and language of psychology--borrowing a label from Husserl and Frege, l have called it 'psychologism'--continued to manifest itself as the dominant research perspective in the subsequent decades. At the same time, propaganda study was progressively assimilated by the language and models of the emergent discipline of communication studies. Thus, it became standard procedure to concentrate upon persuasion largely as a function of communication, and then to conceptualize communication, in a linear, mechanistic fashion, as a "process by which an individual (the communicator) transmits stimuli (usually verbal) to modify the behavior of other individuals (the audience)" (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953, 12). This sort of perspective continues more or less to show itself in Silverstein's (1987) enthusiasm over "reformulating a science of propaganda as a sub-discipline of political psychology" (p. 49). Psychologism and its empirical bias is still very much evident in Partkanis and Aronson's *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (1991) when the authors define propaganda in terms of agreeable cognitive responses, and also when they confidently assert that "persuasion is no more mysterious than a household lamp" (p. 25).

Even when Erwin Fellows in "Propaganda and Communication: A Study in Definitions" (1957) undertook to ground the dynamics of propaganda in the language of the dominant communication model of the time--"who says what to whom with what effect", "why is it said…and how is it said?"--the result was still very much dominated by the biases and language of empirical-behaviorist psychology. That bias has never really much changed. Psychologism may appear to be less overt, but it is certainly no less operative in, contemporary treatments of propaganda by communication scholars. For instance, in Jowett and O'Donnell (1992, 18-35),

the notions of persuasion and propaganda are developed in terms of such metaphors and features as: transfer and transaction; stimulation and stimulus situation; response and response modification; motivation, attitude change; satisfaction of needs and wants; resonance. The upshot of all this is that the reality of propaganda is commonly framed in terms of belief manipulation and attitude changes, and clothed in the language of psychology, and physical metaphors.

These sorts of accounts--structured in terms of persuasion effects, the nomenclature of psychology and simplistic communication divisions--left researchers with little more than superficial notions of propaganda. Moreover, these notions have a way of graduating into outright incoherence. Incoherence manifests itself in a number of treatments which fail to distinguish between the concept of propaganda and the concepts of information or communication--a failure, once again, that stems from working with inadequate notions of propaganda. For both Rohatyn (1988) and Edelstein (1997), whatever we say about propaganda is itself indistinguishable from propaganda so that we unavoidably wind up with *propaganda about propaganda*--hardly instructive! Hummel and Huntress (1949, 3) represent the most outrageous form of incoherence when they write (or imply) that (all) scientific and mathematical discourse is propaganda, and that "a fish that imitates a rock in order to lure its luncheon a little closer is a propagandist….both fish and physicist are propagandists." To fully appreciate the degree of offence, let me just add that the Edelstein (1997) and Hummel and Huntress (1949) notions are posited as early premises in books dedicated to propaganda analysis

Commentaries such as these manifest the bankruptcy of the idea of propaganda, a bankruptcy directly traceable to a sequence of research and (anti-) theoretical deficits. The message deeply embedded within that history is that propaganda, described in quasi-mechanistic (stimulus and response) and consequentialist language, should be thought of along the following lines:

1) Propaganda is a precipitate of discrete psychological events and persuasion effects, including behavior (rituals, demonstrations, marches and picketing).

2) Propaganda also comprises independent artifacts--images, texts, slogans, film, music--well distanced from what I will argue shortly are their originating epistemological conditions.

3) Within that array of largely psychological and physical effects, the dominant image of propaganda processes is one that is concentrated in opinions or belief states, and in the manipulation and reinforcement thereof.

4) Another deeply embedded pre-conception seems to be at work here. Since information, knowledge and understanding entail belief states, the assumption seems to lurk that we can't really perceive or formulate very much of a distinction between the purely doxastic features of consciousness (belief, opinion, point of view) and the more hefty features of information, knowledge, and understanding--or, at least in the context of propaganda belief-mechanism, that we can't really tell or identify what that difference looks like.

5) When distanced from their deeper epistemological determinants, the psychologized notions of propaganda predictably take on an ethically neutral cast--an almost universal assumption in persuasion-effects research and most

propaganda analysis. (See Fellows, 1955, 186-188; Sproule, 1989a, 15; Qualter, 1985, 108; Philip Taylor, 1998, xv)

Moving on to the Philosophical Plane

Definitions of propaganda tend to centralize such commonplace notions as belief, opinion, attitude reinforcement, thought control, deception and lies. But even though an intimate connection is made between propaganda and one or more of these, as psychological states or episodes, scarcely any attempt has yet been made to systematically analyze propaganda in terms of its epistemological status. With rare exceptions (Alex Carey, 1997, 75-84; Ellul, 1957 , 1973; Combs and Nimmo, 1993), propaganda theorists have systematically ignored this dimension. That neglect is curious because *use of the word 'propaganda' is already a statement abut the defective quality of information transmitted, received and believed, and its suspect purposes*. What is still missing is a more developed picture of the complex interplay between propaganda and truth, the use of facts and information, propaganda's preferred relationship to belief, and its impact upon mind. In short, there is a need to move beyond manipulation-based notions of propaganda, framed in the language and theory of psychology, to accounts which can supply us with a more refined understanding of the epistemic conditions that constitute propaganda. Quite simply we have reached the point at which there is a pressing need for an *epistemology of propaganda*.

Propaganda and information

The close relationship between information and propaganda has been described most chillingly by Jacques Ellul (1957; 1973) when he observes that in modern technological society, information and propaganda "cannot be separated from one another" and insists upon "the impossibility of clearly distinguishing between propaganda and information" (1957, 62, 67; italics added). To some (Steinfatt, 1979; Selucky, 1982, 6; Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992, ix) the claim seems tautological or, at least, unworkable; but it's important to understand what Ellul is and is not saying. He is not saying that the *concept* of propaganda is the same as the *concept* of information. What he is saying is that in practice it is difficult if not impossible for the average person to distinguish between the two.

Ellul's 'indistinguishability thesis' summarizes a motif within news analysis that runs through most of this century from the early warnings of Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922) to the present. During the 1990 Gulf War, Philip Knightly posed the dilemma in these words: "So how can the ordinary newspaper reader and television viewer distinguish the news from the propaganda? The answer is that he cannot." (as quoted in Taylor, 1992, 24). In nearly as global a fashion, Herman and Chomsky (1988) apply their five-filter model of propaganda to characterize the entire U.S. news-media industry. The same sort of identity or confusion is regularly affirmed in international radio broadcasting (Bethel, 1982, 24; Wasburn 1992, 85). In peace and wartime, propaganda agencies regularly title themselves as offices, ministries or bureaus of information—a euphemism that tends to both neutralize and to disguise their dark side.

There is yet another dimension to the indistinguishability or inseparability thesis, this time more from the perspective of the message-transmission or propagandist himself. This time, Ellul

(1957) underscores the necessity of information as an enabling pre-condition of propaganda ever taking hold. An uninformed audience is not one that is likely to accept the message. Just as the prior dissemination of information is needed to generate public opinion, a generalized awareness of issues, so too it is the sine qua non for the existence of propaganda:

> Propaganda means absolutely nothing unless information has been at work beforehand….For actually it is information that creates the problems that propaganda will exploit and to which it will claim to offer solutions.   Indeed, propaganda exists only when a totality of acts has become in the eyes of those who constitute opinion, a problem. (pp. 71-72)

A seamless continuum unfolds within this kind of situation. Propaganda in its earlier and disposing stages, what Jowett and O'Donnell (1992, 15-17) call both "subpropaganda" and "facilitative communication", sets the agenda by naming the issues. Indeed, agenda-setting theories of the media and the press (wherein the media map out the broad contours of our public awareness and the boundaries of our consciousness without really generating much in the way of understanding and explanation) are literally textbook examples of alternative communication concepts and theories which now stand in for the kind of influence-analysis that used to be done in earlier kinds of propaganda analysis (Mander in Wilke, 1998 , x; Sproule, 1989, 227.)

Propaganda and Mind

The propaganda-information symbiosis does not end here.   There exists a considerable body of literature affirming the influential role exercised by the information industries in our technologically dominated societies--or technopolies--both in shaping the propagandee's cognitive appetites, and in supplying instructionally inferior information--'infotainment'--to assuage these appetites: E.g., Combs and Nimmo, 1993; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Mitroff and Bennis, 1989; Parenti, 1993; Postman, 1979, 1985, 1993. Descriptions repeatedly underscore the debilitating power of propaganda and its deliberate promotion of irrationality and anti-rationality.   In Ellul's (1973) unnerving scenario, the modern deluge of information, while it may prompt some awareness, does not really instruct, but simply overwhelms, ultimately disabling the public:

> [M]uch of the information disseminated nowadays—research findings, facts, statistics, explanations, and analyses--*eliminate* personal judgment and the capacity to form one's own opinion even more surely than the most extravagant propaganda…excessive data do not enlighten the reader or the listener; they drown him….And because rational propaganda thus creates an irrational situation, it remains above all propaganda—that is inner control over the individual…(p. 87)

Ellul's portrait (1973, 138-160) of the symbiotic linkage between information and propaganda is predicated on a vision of the moral and psychological weakness within the modern citizen who both welcomes and embraces simple nostrums. "[Most people] are ready to accept propaganda that will permit them to participate and which hides their incapacity beneath explanations, judgments and news….The great force of propaganda lies in giving modern man all-embracing, simple explanations and massive, doctrinal causes without which he could not live with the news." (pp. 140, 146). Ellul (1973) identifies the propagandee's need "not to be just…but to seem just, to find reasons for asserting that one is just….This corresponds to man's refusal to see reality--his own reality…(p. 155). Collectively, then, the epistemological frailties (and moral weaknesses) of many isolated individuals add up to a social pathology that both

enables and invites the soothing ministrations of what Edelstein (1997) calls "mediaprop" and 'infoprop'. Nor is Ellul's portrait dated. Daniel Boorstin (1971) said much the same sort of thing about the addictive power of images as a form of propaganda; and the culture of "palaver "--unserious, beguiling media-chatter--described by Combs and Nimmo (1992) is yet another aspect of the same scenario. More recently, Cohen and Metzger (1998) record conceptions of the public's thirst for "ontological security" through the intersection of "social affiliation" and the mass media, especially TV.

But while stereotypes, myths and self-sealing beliefs sound like serious defects, a number of propaganda and communication theorists, moving beyond communication content and items, prefer to underscore the structural and agentic impairments to reason itself. Ellul (1973, 169-187), for example, describes how propaganda short-circuits critical thinking, renders analysis and reflection superfluous, and seeks to induce action, adherence, and participation with as little thought as possible (p. 180). Terence Moran (1979, 187-89), using the criteria of thinking practices, symbolic systems, and appeals, distinguishes between genuine communication and propaganda--which he calls "pseudocommunication." In genuine communication, he writes, "the thinking tends to be individual and critical", and appeals are rational, with an emphasis on a clear relationship between the message and supporting data." By contrast, in propaganda, thinking is collective, uncritical, and the sender exercises control over both the information flow and analysis; and appeals are now largely emotional, not rational. Propaganda manifests itself, then, not simply in the content of particular beliefs or skewed attitudes, but more radically in the impairment of the mind's operations, and in a retreat from communication.

Something of this can be glimpsed in Gauthier's (1994) diagnoses of impaired- reasoning techniques in the context of negative political advertising. More precisely, he analyzes referential structures used in French-language TV ads designed to discredit political opponents, their parties an platforms, during the 1993 Canadian federal elections. Gauthier finds that the referring expressions, used as simple descriptions, often have the feel of an argument, and can easily induce inferences. In reality, they are little more than suggestions and undeveloped affirmations. The referring expressions, often vague or abstract, may be self-referential and favorable (e.g., "new party", "new blood", "fresh ideas"); or the referring text may also be just the camera image, combined with a slogan or jingle, expressing certain values and ideals: job creation, the greatness of Canada, hope. Gauthier calls these kinds of self-reference "pure" reference "which does not serve any reasoning of any kind: it is posited and justified by itself" (p. 103). There are also opponent-directed, negative references (e.g., "old parties"; the "failures" of other systems or parties; "inconsistency"; the vulnerable portions of an opponent's platform) in which the identify of defective opponents is left unclear: "those who [*ceux qui*] plunged thousands of people into poverty."

Gauthier's central point is that these kinds of ambiguous unfinished references reinforce various modes of adversarial arguments, historically identified as fallacious reasoning. The do so as "referential argumentation"—that is, as highly suggestive utterances, descriptors or images that pose as arguments in themselves and which invite us to complete an intended line of inference. They are effective because the listener or viewer is nudged to complete an intended argument or supply a conclusion, and does it without realizing that he or she is doing so. In this way, the persuadee actively participates in his own self-persuasion with no sense of imposition. Like (or as) enthymeme-induced persuasion, then, referential argumentation is virtually imperceptible, comfortable, and extremely effective. (For Gauthier this is reason enough to

condemn referential argumentation as inherently unethical [p. 108], another philosophical contact point worth considering later.)

Propaganda, Truth and Credibility

The term 'disinformation', now widely used as a synonym for propaganda, symbolizes the epistemic contradiction that lies at the heart of most propaganda. In some ways it is a more useful descriptor than 'propaganda' because it signalizes if not factual falsity, at leas the falsity of intent within the propaganda enterprise at the same time as it refers to the feature of information exchange. According to Ellul (1973, 53, 58), the propaganda enterprise is inherently dishonest in its intent. Even so, it is widely recognized among the propagandists themselves that the success of disinformation campaigns is proportional to the degree in which correct information is communicated (Bittman, 1985, 49, 56; Katz, 1982, 50-51). Melor Sturua (in Lapham, 1984), a one-time U.S.-based Soviet correspondent, put this point about the use of truth as well as anyone when he stated: "For propaganda to succeed, the fact itself must be true. If the fact is true, then it is possible to believe the interpretation."

Once again, however, propaganda runs more deeply than just the manipulative use of bits of information and belief. The propagandist's attitude towards the use of truths and falsity is inherently equivocal and ruthlessly expedient. He will use either one depending upon which is most likely to succeed, but he or she prefers to work with truth. Truth enhances the credibility of both the message and its sources whereas falsity, if unmasked, threatens both of these as well as the effectiveness of the propagandist's efforts. Leo Bogart (1976, 128-41) uses the phrase "strategy of truth" to underscore the pragmatic attitude of the USIA during the Cold War, and WWII American film propagandists in general. In the journalism and PR sectors, Fox (1999, 84-112) highlights "congenial truth", the stock-in-trade of spin-doctors, as being a "pact between the reporters and the reader, an understanding of reality that is mutually agreeable" but which, often as not, is far removed from reality (pp. 104-105).

Since the concept of propaganda, not unlike deception and distortion, and propaganda analysis logically presuppose a concept of truth, I need to pause briefly here in order to clarify what I mean by the concepts of truth and its allied virtue of truthfulness. I use the word 'truth' to mean an agreement (conformity, accord, match, fit) between what is thought, believed, judged and uttered (the representation, statement, proposition or report) and what is the case--that, is, the real situation or state of affairs in the (extra-mental) world. By 'truthfulness' I mean the enduring disposition or commitment to utter true statements and reports. Traditionally referred to as the 'correspondence" or "conformity" theory of truth, *this is the concept of truth that is always presupposed in propaganda analysis and commentary*. The consistency or coherence concept of truth (which names the accord between [systems of] statements or reports) is also relevant, but I take it to be ultimately secondary to the correspondence theory. While Alex Carey (1997, 75-84) also remarks upon "the remarkable correspondence in attitude to truth between pragmatists and propagandists", it's important to appreciate that the pragmatism he focuses on is ground-level expediency at the level of the practitioner's attitude or treatment.[2]

---

[2] Carey's use of the words 'pragmatism' and 'pragmatic' to describe propaganda's relationship to truth requires qualification. By virtue of its simplistic utilitarianism, 'mere expediency' or 'expedient' might be more appropriate. Propaganda's pragmatism is not at all like the socially attuned consequentialism of mainstream

The propagandist is totally unconcerned with the value of truth-as-correspondence, let alone with truthfulness--except as tools or stratagems that might be exploited. There is nothing then of the serious effort and moral commitment that Lorraine Code (1987) identifies in the enterprise of knowing well: "A kind of normative realism constitutes the implicit ideal of good knowing at the core of correspondence and coherence theories of truth and knowledge, too.   Although actual correspondence relations are difficult, if not impossible, to establish, sustaining the effort to do so as well as possible is a mark of virtuous intellectual conduct" (p. 131) Hence, the full weight of truthful communication manifests itself not just in particular episodes of telling the truth, but in a more extended fashion as the practice and pattern of assembling reports with whatever degree of care, evidence and rigor they require.

Now, the propagandist exempts himself from this value-system of truth, truthfulness and "virtuous intellectual conduct." In propaganda, the truth is regularly reduced to the status of what is merely expedient or useful, to a means. This radical inversion of an historically cherished value[3] is disconcerting enough in itself, but it is all the more so when it parades under the guise of objectivity and strict methodology. Such ruses have been convincingly illustrated in the context of organizational communication. In *Bureaucratic Propaganda* (1980), authors Altheide and Johnson provide a well documented case that the organizational report has become the principal unit of propaganda on the contemporary scene. Such reports, whether drafted by military, governmental, religious, social-service or media agencies are primarily self-serving accounts which aim to enhance and justify an organization's behavior to its intended readership. Even though they ostensibly rely upon statistics and acknowledged methodologies, virtually none of the reports examined by the authors supplied any indication about how the reports themselves were compiled, nor why one interpretation of the facts was adopted rather than another. Facts, numbers and percentages abound, but the rationales behind the various interpretations are muted. On the contrary, it becomes apparent that the reports studied by Altheide and Johnson were intended primarily not to publish the truth about the organization itself, but to persuade relevant persons and publics. Equally transparent is the systematic manipulation of statistics in such a way as to clothe organizational reports with an aura of rationality and scientific objectivity. Within all of this, Altheide and Johnson acutely identify the nearly imperceptible declension of truth from an end to a means:

---

philosophical pragmatism. See, for example, Christopher Lyle Johnstone (1983) "Dewey, Ethics and Rhetoric: Toward a Contemporary Conception of Practical Wisdom,", *Philosophy and Rhetoric*,16, 185-207.

[3] In today's climate of postmodernism and deconstructionism, there is no longer unanimous agreement on the primacy of truth, let alone correspondence-truth as a primary communication value. George Steiner (1975, pp. 110-235), for instance, champions the human ability to dissemble and falsify as "crucial both to human liberty and to the genius of language" (p. 223). David Nyberg (1993) argues that deception is rooted in our nature, and often a good thing. No surprise, then, when Oliver Thomson (1999) insists that the "human species is a *natural* propagandist", and that our "*basic instinct* to propagandize" is "as *innate* as a peacock's display of its feathers" (p. 327, italics added). Even within the enterprise of media criticism, there has been an erosion of the conventional ideas of truth and truthfulness as standards of media performance (Cunningham, 1986; McConnell, 1990). For Combs and Nimmo (1993, pp. 217-222), postmodernism and post-structuralism greatly blur the boundary lines between propaganda and communication , and also the outlines of conventional truth-based propaganda analysis. Deborah Lipstadt (1993) views postmodern epistemological relativism as a powerful ally of so-called revisionist (Holocaust) history and of the hate propaganda that it constitutes and serves.

> What has been overlooked is the essential aspect of propaganda--the practical use of information…. The practical use of truth is characteristic of most organizations in our modern age….Bureaucratic propaganda uses truth for organizational goals. (p. 23)

This instrumentalization of truth reveals an epistemological warp, but it is also something more than that. First, Altheide and Johnson see it is a necessary or defining condition of bureaucratic propaganda. Second, it is a moral inversion as well since the reports themselves, in a very concrete way, transform the order of ends into that of mere utility. Epistemic goals and excellences , such as information and truth, pose as little more than mere strategies. I will only suggest here that this is one of several reasons to conclude that propaganda is generally an inherently unethical enterprise requiring another kind of philosophical analysis.

Another way to say all this is that credibility--better still, the state of actually being believed--is secured at the price of truth. The commonplace observation that propaganda instills beliefs or modifies perceptions is not incorrect, but rather incomplete. The mere presentation of messages or images is not enough to persuade unless the audience assents, and the audience assents only when the message and/or its sources inspire trust and credibility; and this is often why propaganda sources are hidden or suppressed (and called 'black propaganda'). In the context of military propaganda, McLaurin (1982, 107) writes, "credibility is the immediate operational goal of PSYOP [i.e., psychological warfare]. All PSYOP seeks to establish credibility of the message, of the communicator, or, usually and implicitly both.." Indeed, credibility very quickly assumes top priority in the propagandist's scheme of values, but its dependency upon the use of truth is no less axiomatic:

> The PSYOP issue is that the technique of waging a campaign of psychological warfare depends upon the slow building of acceptance by the audience, so it follows that truth is the most important ingredient. Such truth, to be sure, can, and sometimes must be selective, for often the truth is not credible.   (Katz, 1982, 46)

The propagandist, then, will tend to prefer credibility to the dissemination of truth if confronted by a choice between the two. Daniel Lerner (1980), in the context of discussing the "strategy of truth" recounts a graphic incident in World War II which illustrates this point:

> As the touchstone of *credibility* became axiomatic in allied propaganda technique, some true stories were not told because they would not be believed. For example, photographs of German prisoners eating oranges in allied POW camps were eliminated from propaganda leaflets on the ground that disbelief among German soldiers (who had not seen an orange in years) would compromise the credibility of the leaflets as a whole. (p. 387)

The same kind of preference for credibility over truth is recorded in Leo Bogart's (1976) analysis of the USIA's philosophy of reporting during the Cold War:

> The "truth" may be misleading. A foreign policy that really makes sense may be harder to propagandize that a dishonest or unsound position. It is apt to be more complex, hence less plausible….Films or books that are "overly realistic" about American \life, such as [James Jones'] *From Here to Eternity*, may be alright for an American audience but unsuitable overseas. Presenting a problem may (a) eclipse the solution and (b) serve the ends of Soviet propaganda. (p. 132)

In practice, then, propaganda and its agents prefer the lesser epistemic values of credibility and actual belief to those of, say, knowledge and understanding. Truth, at best, is only a strategy, a tool, but it has no special value apart from its utility. Hence, the virtue of truthfulness

or honesty also has no merit for the propagandist other than as a Machiavellian pose that promotes credibility and prompts assent. At the same time, we should remain mindful of enabling conditions within audiences. Combs and Nimmo (1993) view a number of dispositions within the audience as important elements in the persuasion process. Among them, they single out (pp. 13-14) the *habit of credulity*, people's "ready openness to suasion and their lack of critical acumen," as an important seedbed within which propaganda takes root. "It is our contention," they write, "that propaganda germinates, flourishes, and thrives best with those who practice the habit of credulity." Hence the importance of myth, they write (pp. 86-94), which as a vehicle of belief commands a convincing force as "a story truer than reality" (p. 87).

The Para-epistemics of Credibility and Credulity

I have been arguing that the phenomenality of propaganda needs to be analyzed from an epistemological perspective in terms of the use of truth and information, credibility, audience credulity, and the profound inversion of truth values that the former entail. Propaganda literature documents that any number of media, techniques, devices--including myth, stereotypes, history, entertainment--continue to bring about this state of affairs. Very briefly I want to indicate how a support system of *para-epistemic* agencies and devices figure in this wholesale transformations. By 'para-espistemic' I mean an array of talents, practices, research enterprises, rhetorical ploys, institutions and settings that propaganda sources exploit or within which they embed messages in order to secure success. They are often mentioned in propaganda analysis, and so we tend to take them for granted. What is less clearly articulated is the kinship these para-epistemic elements have to the inherently epistemological core of propaganda. Because the philosophical approach to propaganda discloses the epistemological roots of propaganda, it enables us to appreciate more deeply the congruity and intimate connection that many of these para-epistemic devices exercise upon the persuasion process.

For instance, McLaurin's (1982) handy compendium of U.S. military propaganda studies describes a number of research and analytical programs designed to enhance wartime military intelligence in the area of PSYOP operations. Outside the wartime and Cold-War contexts, however, I would like to just briefly indicate how another kind of research organization functions as para-epistemic agencies to reinforce the epistemic layering at the core of propaganda.

Think tanks enter into the picture as a powerful para-epistemic instrument. Among the approximately 12,000 think tanks now operating in the United States (and the 100 or so in Canada), a number have clearly emerged as effective sources both of commercial corporate influence and of political advocacy (Abelson, 1995, 93-126; Alex Carey, 1997, 90-108). Carey (p. 91) speaks of "a quite new emphasis on promoting and disseminating their products nationwide--that is, on proselytizing." Set up as generously funded, tax-deductible research agencies, these think tanks engage scholars and writers to assemble academic studies with which they then flood the policy arena. More specifically, they provide these materials, including newspaper columns and releases, to targeted readerships--government leaders and policy makers and news media. In this manner, they function primarily as what Carey calls "treetops-propaganda"--sophisticated information directed at influential opinion leaders and policy shapers. Examples abound. In the US: American Economic Institute for Public Policy Research; Brookings Institution; Business Roundtable; Conference Board; Heritage Foundation; Hoover Institute; and the Institute for Policy Studies. In Canada: Canada West Foundation; C.D. Howe

Institute; Fraser Institute; Institute for Research on Public Policy. In Australia: Committee for Economic Development in Australia. In Great Britain: the Institute of Economic Affairs.

These advocacy organizations, less dedicated to the conventional think-tank role of independent scholarly research, analysis and policy formation, are very evidently engaged in the process of political persuasion by working to impose their own brand of ideology. A major technique, according to Carey, is "to inundate relevant debate with an endless steam of books and research reports" (p. 90), an instance of the classic strategy to overwhelm targeted readerships with impressively assembled information combined with that of steering opinion formation. In this way, they move into the sphere of propaganda practice: "they have come to resemble interest groups and political action committees by pressuring decision makers to implement politics compatible with their ideological beliefs….[and] are deeply committed to imposing their ideological agenda on the electorate." (Abelson, 1998, 537-538) As one institute director tellingly conceded, advocacy think tanks "don't want to stimulate public dialogue, they're out to impose their own monologue" (cited in Abelson, 1998, p. 538). Carey (1997, 106) quotes a former head of the American Heritage Foundation as saying that "it takes an institution to help popularize and propagandize an idea--to market an idea.'   Carey also believes these institutions are devilishly effective: he credits them with contributing to the emergence of Margaret Thatcher-style conservatism, the promotion of corporate commercialism, the reduction of union power and the defeat of labor-law reform in United States, and "the closing of the American mind." (pp. 93-95)

This admittedly brief glimpse of think-tank activity is instructive: through the evidence of their processes and reports, they stand in larger and clearer outlines as apparent instances of the interplay between the use of information and research and the belief-structuring core of propaganda.[4]   At the same time, think tanks illustrate the sophistication and the complex panoply of epistemic types in this age of propaganda.

Conclusion

Propaganda is difficult to identify because of its ambiguous, deep-structured epistemological linkages.   It is self-disguising because it parades so freely and easily within the information order itself. In this paper, I have argued that propaganda, typically defined in terms of surface episodes such as skewed language, belief change and thought control, commands far greater epistemological amplitude and diversity than that. On the contrary, propaganda processes and messages incorporate a complex range of dissembling uses and practices in relation to the manifold of cognition. Characteristically, propaganda thrives on confusion and information-overload; it relies upon the dissembling use of facts and truths; it poses as information and understanding; it subordinates truth to the lesser modalities of attention, credibility and utility; it accords the highest premium to the state of actually induced belief; and it marshals an impressive battery of para-epistemic talents and devices. *This cluster of epistemic disservices does more to situate propaganda than any other assortment of psychological descriptions, techniques or persuasion effects. Rather, it is this array of epistemic deficits, disclosed through an*

---

[4] For an examination of how other para-epistemic devices also function *in-text*, see my chapter, "Smoke and Mirrors: A Confirmation of Jacques Ellul's Theory of Information Use in Propaganda." In Ted J. Smith, ed., *Propaganda: A Pluralistic Perspective*. 1989. New York: Praeger. Pp. 151-163.

epistemological analysis, that initially constitutes and identifies the phenomenon we call 'propaganda'. In short, propaganda is originally, primarily and ineluctably a philosophical concept. The popular notion that propaganda involves the manipulation of [1] perceptions and beliefs, then, is not false, but it is a woefully incomplete reflection of its inherent epistemic complexity and diversity. It is an equally inadequate prophylactic: Not to appreciate propaganda's epistemological amplitude leaves us at the mercy of those who do.

Looking beyond, I think that the epistemology of propaganda also provides at least a prima facie case that an entrenched climate of propaganda is an unethical state of affairs. That, too, I submit, requires yet another *philosophical* sortie into propaganda analysis.

References

Abelson, Donald E. and Christine M. Carberry. 1998. "Following Suit or FallingBehind? A Comparative Analysis of Think Tanks in Canada and the United States," Canadian *Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* XXXI (3), 525-555.

Allen, Barry. 1993. "On the Definition of Propaganda," *The Canadian Journal of RhetoricalStudies/La Revue Canadienne D'Études Rhétoriques* 3, 1-12.

Altheide, David L. and J. M. Johnson. 1980. *Bureaucratic Propaganda*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Biddle, William W. 1931. "A Psychological Definition of Propaganda," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 26, 283-295.

Bethel, Tom. 1982. "Propaganda Warts." *Harper's*, May, 19-25.

Bogart, Leo. 1976. Premises for Propaganda: *The USIA's Operating Assumptions in the Cold War*. New York: Free Press.

Boorstin, Daniel J. 1971[1961]. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*. New York: Atheneum.

Carey, Alex. 1997. *Taking the Risk out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty.* (Andrew Lohrey, ed.). Urbana and Chicagol, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Code, Lorraine.1987. *Epistemic Responsibility*. Hanover & London: University Press of New England.

Cohen, Jonathan and Miriam Metzger.1998. "Social Affiliation and the Achievement of Ontological Security through Interpersonal and Mass Communication," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15, 41-60.

Cole, Robert (ed.) 1998. *The Encyclopedia of Propaganda*. 3 vols. Marmonk, NY: Sharp Reference.

Combs, James E. and Dan Nimmo. 1993. *The New Propaganda: The Dictatorship of Palaver in Contemporary Politics*. New York, London.: Longman.

Cunningham, Stanley B. 1986. "Terminal Distortion: Basal Incoherence in Some Recent Media Criticism," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 12 (#2), 51-70.

Darnovsky, Marcy, Claude Steiner and Charles Rappleye. 1989. "What is Propaganda, Anyway?" *Propaganda Review* 5 (summer), 6-13.

Edelstein, Alex. 1997. *Total Propaganda: From Mass Culture to Popular Culture*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Ellul, Jacques. 1957. "Information and Propaganda" *Diogenes*18, 61-77.

Ellul, Jacques. 1967. *Histoire de la Propagande*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Ellul, Jacques. 1973 [1965]. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. New York: Random House (Vintage Press) [Original French edition, 1962]

Fellows, Erwin W. 1957. "Propaganda and Communication: A Study in Definitions," *Journalism Quarterly* 34, 431-442.

Fellows, Erwin W. 1955. "'Propaganda': History of a Word," American *Speech: A Quarterly of Linguistic Usage*,34, 182-189.

Foulkes, A.P. 1983. *Literature and Propaganda*. London, New York: Methuen

Gauthier, Gilles. 1994). "Referential Argumentation and its Ethical Considerations in Televised Political Advertising: The Case of the 1993 Canadian Federal Election Campaign," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 31, 96-110.

Henderson, Edgar H. 1943. "Toward a Definition of Propaganda," *The Journal of Social Psychology,* 18, 71-87.

Herman, Edward S. 1992. *Beyond Hypocrisy: Decoding News in an Age of* Propaganda. Montreal, New York: Black Rose Books.

Herman, Edward. S. and Noam Chomsky. 1988. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon.

Hovland, Carl I., Irving L. Janis and Harold H. Kelley. 1953. *Communication and Persuasion*: *Psychological Studies on Opinion Change*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hummel, William and Keith Huntress. 1949. *The Analysis of Propaganda*. New York: Henry Holt

Johnstone, Christopher Lyle. 1983. "Dewey, Ethics, and Rhetoric: Toward a Contemporary Conception of Practical Wisdom," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16, 185-207.

Jowett, Garth S. 1987. "Propaganda and Communication: The Reemergence of a Research Tradition," *Journal of Communication* 37, 97-114.

Jowett, Garth. S. and Victoria O'Donnell. 1992. *Propaganda and Persuasion*. Second ed. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Katz, Phillip P. 1982. "Tactical Psyop in Support of Combat Operations." In Ron McLaurin D. (E[2]d.), *Military Propaganda: Psychological Warfare and Operations*. New York: Praeger. Pp. 42-54.

Keshen, Jeffrey A. 1996. *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War*. Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press.

Lapham, Lewis H. 1984. "The Propaganda Man" *Parade*, July 4, 14-15.

Lerner, Daniel. 1980. "Revolutionary Elites and World Symbolism." In Harold Lasswell, Daniel Lerner & Hans Speier (eds.), Propaganda *and Communication in World History*, vol. 2, 371-394. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.

Lippmann, Walter. 1965[1922]. *Public Opinion*. New York: The Free Press.

Lipstadt, Deborah E. 1993. *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. NewYork: The Free Press.

McConnell, Robert. R. 1990. "Disappearance of the Truth and Realism in Television Criticism," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 5 (3), 191-202.

McLaurin, Ron D. (Ed.) 1982. *Military Propaganda: Psychological Warfare and Operations*. New York: Praeger.

Mitroff, Ian I. and Warren Bennis. 1989. *The Unreality Industry: The Deliberate Manufacturing of Falsehood and What it is Doing to Our Lives*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moran, Terance P. 1979. "Propaganda as Pseudocommunication," *Et Cetera* 2, 181-97.

Nyberg, David. 1993. *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Parenti, Michael. 1993. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media*. Second ed. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Postman, Neil. 1979. "The First Curriculum: Comparing School and Television," *Phi Delta Kappan* (November), 163-168.

Postman, Neil. 1985. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin.

Postman, Neil. 1993. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New YorK: Vintage (Random House).

Pratkanis, Anthony and Elliot Aronson. 1991. *Age of Propaganda: The Everday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*. New York: W.H. Freeman & Co.

Qualter, Terence H. 1985. *Opinion Control in Democracies*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Rohatyn, Dennis. 1988. "Propaganda Talk." In Trudy Govier, (ed.) *Selected Issues in Logic and Communication*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. Pp. 73-92.

Selucky, Katka. 1982. *Propaganda and Ideology*. Montreal, QB: McGill University (Graduate Communications Program: Working Papers Series).

Silverstein, Brett. (1987). "Toward a Science of Propaganda," *Political Psychology* 8 (#1), 49-59.

Smith, Ted D. (ed.) 1989. *Propaganda: A Pluralistic Perspective*. New York: Praeger.

Sproule, J. Michael. 1997. *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sproule, J. Michael. 1994. *Channels of Propaganda*. Bloomington, IN: EDINFO Press and ERIC.

Sproule, J. Michael. 1989a. "*Social Responses to Twentieth-Century Propaganda*." In Ted D. Smith (ed.), 1989, *Propaganda: A Pluralistic Perspective*. New York: Praeger. Pp. 5-22.

Sproule, J. Michael. 1989b. "Progressive Propaganda Critics and the Magic Bullet Myth." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (# 3), 225-246.

Sproule, J. Michael. 1987. "Propaganda Studies in American Social Science: The Rise and Fall of the Critical Paradigm," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 73, 60-78.

Steiner, George. 1975. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. New York, London: Oxford University Press.

Steinfatt, Thomas M. 1979. "Evaluating Approaches to Propaganda Analysis." *Et Cetera* 36, 166-177.

Stiff, James B. 1994. *Persuasive Communication*. New York, London: Guilford Press.

Taylor, Philip M. 1998. "Foreward." In Robert Cole, (ed*.), The Encyclopedia of Propaganda*. Vol. 1, pp. xv-xix.

Taylor, Philip M. 1992. War and the Media: *Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War*. Manchester University Press

Thomson, Oliver. 1999. *Easily Led: A History of Propaganda*. Surrey, U.K.: Sutton.

Wasburn, Philo C. 1992. *Broadcasting Propaganda: International Radio Broadcasting and the Construction of Political Reality*. Westport, CT, London: Praeger.

Wilke, Jürgen. 1998. *Propaganda in the 20th Century: Contributions to its History*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.