PROPAGANDA AND JOURNALISM

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Many persons may wonder why a discussion of propaganda is appropriate to a discussion of the mass media. Probably the best justification for the inclusion of this subject is that propaganda is tied very closely to the mass media: it is transmitted largely by them, and in many cases is created by them. In fact, it is almost impossible to think about mass media in the modern world without considering propaganda. Mass media are (1) filled with a wide assortment of propaganda, and (2) filled with a wide assortment of propagandists. Media are both transmitters of, and formulators of, propaganda.

Propaganda loses any kind of meaningful significance if it is defined too broadly, if it (as some writers propose) becomes synonymous with organized dissemination of messages. Then, of course, every kind of communication effort would be propaganda, depending admittedly on the connotation of the word "organized." Propaganda in the context of journalism, or in the context of the mass media, must be understood to be something more limited, more specific. Otherwise, we might as well scrap the word altogether. It has been said that the term propaganda has
a negative or evil connotation in a journalistic context. This is undoubtedly true, especially in that part of journalism which purports to be objective, reliable, balanced, thorough and credible — the *news* aspects.

On the other hand, many journalists and other workers in the mass media embrace propaganda as a very necessary part of the media output. Propaganda has, even in its most negative meanings, chiseled out a niche for itself in the most highly respected of the mass media. Columnists and news commentators accept it is a valid aspect of their journalistic endeavors. Editorial writers could not operate without it. Even many so-called "interpretive" or "analytical" writers and speakers call on propaganda techniques to explain, interpret, analyze, discuss, and persuade.

The "straight" newscast on radio and television or the newsstory in the press is about the only mass media sector still holding out against the inroads of propaganda. At least this is the case in theory. In practice, however, many students of propaganda recognize that the very best propaganda vehicle is the so-called objective, neutral, dispassionate news report. Journalism today is spilling over with propaganda, not only in advertising where one would expect it but in voice inflections, facial expressions, headlines, photographs, captions — everywhere. In fact, many cynics suggest that *journalism is propaganda*. Although I also feel that propaganda manifests itself in
Journalism to a very great degree, I do not want to go so far as to propose that there is no journalism which cannot be considered free of propaganda. The distinction between propaganda and non-propaganda must be preserved in journalism if the credibility gap we hear so much about does not become so broad as to be total disbelief.

Toward a Definition of Propaganda

One of the main problems, of course, in talking about propaganda is that so many concepts or definitions of the term exist. And, it might be said, that the definers of the term may be propagandizing when they submit their definitions. What is the core meaning of "propaganda"? Are there any common denominators of meaning associated with the term? I believe there are. And, although the semantic tangle which has grown up around the term is sticky and dense, I believe that the whole subject of propaganda is important to the journalist and should be considered seriously. Why? Because any extended definition of, or talk about, propaganda brings the concerned person into an area of discourse where certain basic issues of journalism have their roots. When one considers propaganda in the context of journalism he forces himself to look directly at many of the "first principles" or foundation stones of journalistic endeavor.

Regardless of which of the many definitions one is examining, he finds certain core ideas about propaganda:
“manipulation,” “purposeful management,” “preconceived plan,” “creation of desires,” “reinforcement of biases,” “arousal of pre-existing attitudes,” “irrational appeal,” “specific objective,” “arousal to action,” “pre-determined end,” “suggestion,” and “creation of dispositions.”

Out of all these terms one may gather a certain impression about propaganda. It seems that propaganda is related to an attempt on the part of somebody to manipulate somebody else. By manipulate, I mean to control—not only the actions but the attitudes of—a person or persons. Somebody (or some group) — the propagandist— is predisposed to cause others to think a certain way, so that they may, in some cases, take a certain action. Propaganda, then, is the effort or the activity by which an initiating communicator proposes to manage the attitudes and actions of others through playing on their pre-existing biases with messages designed largely to appeal to their emotions and/or irrationality.

The propagandist does not want his audience to analyze or to think seriously about his message. He does not want to be questioned about his remarks. He does not want to be forced to deal in specifics or to present evidence. He has what Harold Lasswell has referred to as a non-educational orientation; by this he meant that the ends or solutions had already been determined before the search for truth began. Contrasted to this is what in Lasswellian terms may be the “deliberative” attitude, the non-propa—
gandistic orientation which implies an unprejudiced and open search for the truth.* Lasswell uses the term "deliberative attitude" to refer to education as distinct from propaganda. Propaganda is not an invitation to the audience to deliberate, to contemplate, to analyze, to think, to question. It is an invitation to come to rather quick conclusions or to reinforce existing conclusions. It is an invitation to change or strengthen one's attitude and to involve oneself in an action of some type.

Another way to say this might be: Propaganda is dependent on the intention of the communicator to use his message to affect the attitude of his audience so as to achieve an end or goal in keeping with the communicator's desires. This emphasizes the deliberate nature of propaganda, the desire of the communicator to achieve a pre-conceived purpose.

Before looking more specifically at propaganda in jour-

nalism, perhaps it would be well to make these points about the propagandist: (1) He is not disinterested, (2) He is not neutral, (3) He has a plan, a purpose, a goal, (4) He wants to influence, to persuade, to affect attitudes and action, and (5) He is not interested in his audience members making up their own minds on the basis of a fair and balanced presentation of information.

Journalism and Propaganda

The journalist may well ask: Am I a propagandist? Quite likely he will have to answer that he is more often than he might like to admit. At least he is probably propagandistic at many times and in many circumstances as he indulges in various aspects of his work. Some journalists, of course, are almost pure propagandists. Others have very little of the propagandist in them. It depends on many factors, but two stand out as most significant:

1) the type of journalistic work the particular journalist performs, and

2) the basic ethical, ideological, and psychological "character" of the particular journalist.

Editorial writers, for example, deal in propaganda far more often than does the writer of sports stories or obituaries. And, generally speaking, a by-lined columnist is more of a propagandist than is the anonymous "straight" news writer. The television "analyst" or "commentator" is
more likely to propagandize than is the reporter in London or the "anchor man" in Washington. However, as we have already pointed out, there are exceptions to these generalizations. In fact, news writers are potentially in a more favored spot to propagandize than are the editorial writers. For the editorial writers are expected by their readers to propagandize (to try to affect attitudes and action), while the news writers are expected to simply present the facts. The facts, of course, may be carefully selected, juggled and twisted; certain facts may be played up or down, or omitted altogether. And the reader will never know it. So the idea that propaganda is only on the editorial page is a "myth"; propaganda is on every page of a newspaper, and on every radio or television news show. This brings us to the second factor, above.

The fundamental journalistic orientation of the person engaged in disseminating information and interpretation has much to do with the amount of propaganda contained in his effort. What is his basic ethical inclination? What are his ideological and political commitments? In other words, is he inclined by personality, political commitment, ethical standards, etc., to want to be informational (dispassionate, neutral, balanced) rather than persuasive (involved, passionate, concerned, subjective)?

If a journalist is inclined to be persuasive, even if he writes only anonymous news stories, he will be as a general rule. On the other hand, there are editorial writers
who are inclined to be balanced, dispassionate and neutral; their editorials reflect this orientation. Therefore, it may well be that audiences of the mass media need to revise their old stereotypes concerning propaganda, and should subscribe to a new one: Don't analyze the particular article to determine the presence of propaganda; rather analyze the writer of the article for the presence of propaganda.

The question arises, of course, as to how a reader, listener, or viewer can detect propaganda in the mass media. For certainly every member of the audience cannot analyze the communicator even if every audience member were a trained psychiatrist. If he gets a clue as to propaganda in a message, he must largely depend on getting it from the message itself. Of course, in the case of television, the viewer may suspect the propagandistic nature of a message by watching the facial expressions of the speaker or speakers very carefully. But inferences drawn from smiles, raised eyebrows, voice inflections, and general demeanor can be quite misleading.

The only way, really, to check on propaganda or the lack of it in a newspaper or some other medium is to be in a position to verify the information, the quotations, and the total context of the communication being considered. By and large, this is impossible. Audience members must accept most of what they get from the media on faith—or, of course, disregard it or suspect it. Certainly most of us are not well enough informed about all of the complex
events reported to us, and analyzed for us, every day to know when we are being misled. In some cases—especially when a story relates to us or to some event we witnessed—we are able to detect bias in a story. But this does not happen very often.

If we know a great deal about a particular writer or commentator, we may be able to detect propaganda in his message—especially if we are not in the same ideological “camp.” We are more critical of, more suspicious of, the reporter or commentator who is known to be of a different political persuasion than ourselves. We either “tune him out” altogether or we constantly look for flaws and weaknesses, contradictions and irrationality, in his message. On the other hand, when we are listening to an ideological or political “colleague,” we are prone to accept most of what he says as rational and truthful.

We are also more prone to have more faith (find it more credible) in a message if it is compatible with our own culture and national interests. Egyptians believe Al Ahram because it reinforces their own beliefs—what they want to believe. Ma‘ariv has the same credibility value for the Israelis for the same reason. Accepting this basic proclivity to believe what one wants to believe, what kind of credibility can an outside, supposedly disinterested, propaganda voice have on a specific country or on persons in it? Undoubtedly, the more a citizen is convinced of the disinterest (fairness) of the outside voice the more credible the
message is likely to be. The BBC, for instance, is likely to be considered far more credible in Southeast Asia because it is disinterested politically in the area and because it has a tradition of objectivity. The South Vietnamese radio perhaps reinforces opinions in that country, but BBC is believed. It is quite possible that reinforcement and belief are two entirely different "news" objectives.*

Propaganda in a closed society (dictatorship) obviously serves a fundamentally different purpose than does propaganda in an open society (democracy). In a closed society it serves mainly to confirm and reinforce attitudes created by the restrictive environment; on the other hand, in a democracy or open society propaganda is pluralistic and competitive and provides the information and ideas for political argument and for the formation of public opinion.

* For example, the author recently heard CBS reporter, Marvin Kalb, speak on the University of Missouri campus. I shall never again believe everything I hear him say about Indo-China. Why? Because we hold the opinion now, in light of his highly biased and opinionated presentation, that he is not disinterested. If he gives an opinion that agrees with mine, I would accept it as reinforcement; if he gives an opinion which I oppose or about which I have no feelings at all, then I would tend to disbelieve him. (For a good discussion of the importance of communicator credibility see Ch. 2 ("Credibility of the Communicator") in Carl Hovland, Irving Janis and Harold Kelley, Communication and Persuasion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).)
Some Techniques of Propaganda

Techniques of propaganda abound. The skilled propagandist is an artist with the techniques; he blends them, changes them, obscures them, and generally uses them carefully depending on the particular audience and the specific occasion. He generally subscribes to the belief that the end justifies any kind of propaganda technique. If he needs to lie, he lies; if he needs to simply distort, he distorts; if he needs to generalize, he generalizes. The propagandist is a pragmatist; he uses what will work. Therefore, he must constantly study himself, people, techniques, and results. He is a practicing psychologist. He uses everything at his command to manipulate, to persuade, to cause action. Technique — tactic and strategy — is his weapon. Therefore, he takes it very seriously.

A main strategical technique is a constant concern with passionate rhetoric and advocacy. The propagandist has little or no use for rational and dispassionate argument. He tries to avoid open discussion, questions. The whole Socratic method is out of the question; the propagandist already has his answers determined. So his main technique is avoidance of rational dialogue.

In line with this overriding strategical objective are a wide variety of tactical techniques. These are used singly or in clusters to achieve specific objectives in differing situations with varying audiences. Many persons are often
led to believe that if they can only learn these tactical techniques and condition themselves to recognize them, they can defend themselves against them. Often propaganda devices are taught for this reason: *so that people can defend themselves against them.* The only thing wrong with this is that people may know something of the nature of these techniques—they can recognize them and label them—but *still are unable* to become effectively immune to their effects. The propagandist knows this. He is aware that some of his propaganda will get through and accomplish its purpose.

Some techniques of propaganda are wasted on some people in some situations. The propagandist is aware of this. He simply makes his propaganda campaign broad enough, flexible enough, to catch all the fish, but he does not really need to catch them all. He constantly revamps his techniques; he blends one with another to make a new one. He keeps a step ahead of the general level of propaganda sophistication in his audience. He keeps his audience guessing, off-balance, and uncertain.

Seven basic propaganda devices, defined by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis during World II, are usually presented in textbooks and discussions of propaganda. Since they are found in so many source materials and are generally well-known, we shall only name them here, without discussing them. They are: namecalling, testimonial, glittering generalities, band-wagon, transfer, plain folks,
and card-stacking.* Although these seven are important, and are used regularly by propagandists of all kinds, they are by no means all the techniques. For example, repetition is a basic one. And, another type is faulty analogy and its first cousin, unfair association.**

The Journalist as Propagandist

Few people like to think of journalists as propagandists. Journalism is to be believed, trusted, respected: this is the traditional concept. Even though opinion has always been accepted as an important part of journalism, the basic "image" of journalism is one of reliability, factualness, and trust. At any rate, it does not seem quite right to go around referring to journalists as "propagandists." For if the image changes and journalists are looked upon as propagandists, what would happen to the libertarian idea that a free people must remain free by being informed by the press so that they might make rational decisions? Do we really want to take our important political information, with which we make our "popular sovereignty" work, from a propagandistic press?


** This is not simply "guilt by association" but also "virtue by association." The association tactic is perhaps the most useful of all propaganda techniques.
It would be rather presumptuous to say that all journalists are propagandists, but it is probably safe to say that most of them are. We may not like to think of them in this way, but a careful observation and analysis of journalists will indicate that they at least have the traits and characteristics of propagandists — at least in many of their activities.

We are not talking here about journalists as propagandists in that they "propagate" or spread information. We are talking about journalists as propagandists in that they "propagate" or spread their own prejudices, biases, and opinions — trying to affect the attitudes of their audiences. Without a doubt, there are journalists who are "machine-like" in their work or who have the kinds of duties not involving them in potentially propagandistic situations, but these are probably in a tiny minority. Most journalists — even those involved in "straight" news reporting — spend much of their time and effort as propagandists.

What are some of the techniques used by journalists in their propaganda effort? There are, of course, dozens of them but the following are a few of the most notable:

*Use of stereotypes.* The mass media, in their news and interpretation aspects, simplify the reality of the events with regularity. They present men and events as one-dimensional. They not only create stereotypes but they perpetuate and spread them through repetition.
Opinion as fact. Even a casual analysis of the mass media will show that a favorite technique is to present opinion disguised as fact. "The audience gave the speaker an enthusiastic welcome." "There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Mr. X was criticizing the President out of a desire for revenge." So much reporting of this type exists in the mass media — in almost every story — that a whole book could be written on this technique.

Biased attribution. How does the mass medium attribute information to a source? What kind of language is used? An attribution verb such as "said" is neutral (not opinionated and evokes no emotional response); an attribution verb such as "snapped" (negatively affective) is a word designed to appeal to the reader's emotions, to give a judgmental stimulus. A verb such as "smiled" is a "favorable" term, for it is positively affective. The journalist's bias for or against some person in the news can be ascertained by analyzing his method of attributing statements to the person.

Information selection. What will the journalist choose to say about a person or an event? Is there a pattern in his choices? Does he stack his message by presenting only bad or only good information? What is the nature of what he ignored to communicate as contrasted with what he choose to communicate? Of course, every reporter must select, but the message becomes propagandistic when a pattern of selection becomes evident. Quoting out of context is, of course, a form of this technique. And it is
really impossible for an audience member of the mass medium to recognize or detect this type of propaganda. He has no standard for comparison.

_Misleading headlines._ The headline writer can propagandize effectively because he knows that, by and large, people come away from stories with the substance of the headline—not the story—in their minds. In fact, many see the headline, but do not read the story under it. So many headlines are twisted, biased, distorted and otherwise rigged, that one is led to believe that headlines bear about as much resemblance to their stories as the stories bear to the reality they purport to report.

_Biased photographs._ Present your heroes from the best perspective, smiling, positive, calm. Show your enemies from the worst possible perspective, frowning, negative, nervous. Photographs may not lie, but they can mislead. They, like facts and quotations in a story, can be selected for a purpose. Anyone who has ever taken news photographs or shot television film knows that the potential for propaganda is extremely great. And, anyone who analyzes photographs in newspapers and magazines and film on television can observe the practical tactics of photographic propaganda.

_Censorship._ Usually we do not think of the mass media indulging in censorship; that is something for government officials to do. But the media do censor, even if they
might call it exercising their editorial or news prerogatives. They leave this story or this picture out; they delete part of this quotation; they throw that entire story into the wastebasket; they chop away two-thirds of this story. They censor, all right, and anyone who thinks it is all perfectly innocent and that journalists restrict information only out of the purest of motives simply has not faced the realities of a journalistic medium. Those who would say that the journalist or the medium has the right under press freedom to censor may well be right; here we are stating that censorship by the media themselves is a very real propagandistic tactic. Two main forms of censorship exist and the mass media use them both. They are: (1) selective control of information to favor a particular viewpoint or editorial position, and (2) deliberate doctoring of information in order to create a certain impression.

Repetition. Look at a newspaper which you know to have a particular bias—political or otherwise. You will see that certain themes, persons, ideas, and slogans appear again and again, day to day, week to week, on its pages. A reader of a "liberal" newspaper such as the Washington Post or the St. Louis Post-Dispatch gets caught up in the newspapers' repetitive pattern of news presentation, editorial stand, etc., until he can predict exactly what "line" the paper will take on almost any event or issue that arises. A reader of the conservative Chicago Tribune can do the same. Television network documentaries and newscasts, with certain rather obvious biases also, are predictable as
to their repetitive positions, themes, and issues.

Negativism. This is a very potent (and observable) tactic of propaganda in journalism. In its news and interpretation, a mass medium should not just be for something or somebody. It should emphasize the negative; it should spotlight the "enemy"; it should be against something or somebody. Mass media appear to find it much more exciting, for example, to be against an American President than to be for him. They likewise seem to relish the idea of blasting away at established institutions, and lending support to the forces in society that are violent, emotional, irrational, atypical, and destructive. Emphasize the negative: this is an important journalistic propaganda tactic. Focus on an enemy, selecting targets in line with pre-existing dispositions of the audience.

Appeal to Authority. This tactic is closely related to the common "testimonial" technique in that it relies heavily on support from well-known and reputable sources and persons. The journalist may attribute a statement to a veiled or vague authority or he may quote selectively a prominent person.* In many news stories there are always plenty of "leading educators" or "prominent theologians" who say or believe this or that. There is some Pentagon spokesman saying something, or some "source close to the

* A journalist may also quote a suspicious or discredited source, also, depending on the effect he wishes to achieve.
President” who is taking a certain stand. If a commentator wants to make a point for his television audience on a controversial subject, he may well find it advantageous to quote some prominent person (who agrees with him) relative to the subject rather than present his own position directly.

**Fictionalizing.** The mass medium may present mere fiction, camouflaging it, of course, as fact. Most often, the journalist does not totally fictionalize; he simply mixes some fiction (or conjecture) into his fact-skeleton. He does not have everything he needs to make a good, complete, compelling story, so he splices in a little fiction—what he thinks might well have happened. He fills “creatively” the gaps in his story, even dreams up certain direct quotations to put in the mouth of his source. Nobody, after all, will ever know any better—except perhaps his source, and what will that matter in the long run? For, after all, has not he maintained a “core of truth” in the story—and, as the old saying goes, you cannot be completely objective in a story, anyway.

Journalists undoubtedly use many other techniques than those mentioned above. They propagandize every time they slant the news, and, as Tamotsu Shibutani correctly points out, slanting the news is a very old and extremely widespread practice.* Most journalists will admit to using many

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of these techniques, such as misrepresentation of facts, censorship of certain items tending to favor an ideological “foe”, giving undue prominence to one side of an issue, selectively quoting from a speech or interview to make a person look good or bad, and arousing strong negative feelings against scapegoats to take attention away from main issues. The propagandistic journalist does not simply tell lies; whenever possible he tells the truth (or at least a portion of it), but this “truthful” slice-of-reality reporting can be propaganda. Shibutani talks of true or factual propaganda, and it is very difficult to distinguish it from news.

What does all of this mean? Does it imply that consumers of mass media messages should look upon these messages as basically propagandistic? It is difficult to answer such a question, for different persons would respond variously, depending on their sophistication, knowledge, experience with the media, and their cynicism. But it is probably safe to say that the mass media and their functionaries generate propaganda and spread the propaganda of others to a far greater extent than most citizens believe.

Is it possible for the receiver of the mass media messages to detect bias and propaganda in them? Probably not, in most cases. The audience member, seldom in a position to check on the factual accuracy, balance, and thoroughness of press reports, is largely at the mercy of the media reporters and editors. He is also in a “detached” position from the
communicator so that he has no real knowledge of the intent and motivation—or standard of ethics—of the person designing the message. He can assume, of course, that most media messages are misleading or biased; he can be skeptical and even cynical. He can disbelieve everything he reads in the newspapers or sees on television; then he will, of course, be safe from journalistic propaganda. But, if he takes such a drastic position, he will also be ignorant of major events and trends going on in his world.

So what must the sensible audience member do? He must accept some information and opinion and reject some. He must expose himself to as diverse a sample of media matter as he possibly can. He will still be frustrated (if he is intellectually alert) because he will find discrepancies among his sources as to factual statements and contradictions among the opinions and observations of columnists and commentators. He will never know just which source is most reliable, but he will develop some ways to make decisions and preserve his sanity in the frustrating welter of information. He will build up his own complex "safety" mechanism for screening incoming information; he will see less and less that does not agree with his dominant dispositions (selective exposure); he will then select from these selected media only those messages which are compatible with his own biases (selective perception) and, finally, he will remember or be affected by only those parts of the message which give him comfort or mental pleasure (selective retention). This whole selectivity process permits
the audience member to protect himself largely against hostile propaganda; at any rate, he uses propaganda to simply reinforce—not challenge—his basic attitudes and predispositions. If he did not do this, he would quickly fly into a million emotional pieces in the face of unverifiable and disharmonic information and opinion which surround him every day.

It may well be, then, that propaganda is really not very potent after all. At least it does not seem extremely powerful in changing opinions; a study of newspaper support of candidates and election outcomes in American history would indicate this is the case. But undoubtedly journalistic propaganda provides a comfort and reinforcement for the receiver if it is compatible with his basic needs. In a pluralistic media system this function of propaganda may work very well; the danger arises when the press begins to contract in its pluralism and the propaganda becomes more and more standardized causing increasing numbers of persons to become unable to find self-supporting and satisfying propaganda.

Strange as it may seem, then, one of the principal reasons for maintaining a pluralistic press is so that we can minimize frustration among the populace through providing a wide variety of propaganda, suitable for a multitude of needs.