

Propaganda is so pervasive that a student of critical thinking must learn to deal with it. Like mosquitoes in the woods, you can't make it go away, but there are things you can do to make things more bearable.

Think about all the sources of propaganda you encounter each day. The radio, the television, billboards, bumper stickers, magazines, signs at the grocery store, text books, teachers, friends, parents, and on and on. If you watch thirty hours of TV per week, you will view roughly 37,822 commercials per year. That's about 100 TV ads per day. You will see another 100 to 300 ads per day through the other mass media. (Age of Propaganda, Pratkanis and Aronson, p. 4) And that's only advertising. By no means is all the propaganda you encounter advertising. In fact, advertising is perhaps the least insidious. Even though advertising is effective (that's why advertisers use them), the results aren't usually that serious. At some level most of us don't really trust ads. What you've got to worry about are those whom you do trust, your teachers for instance. With those whom you trust, there is a tendency to let down your guard.

If you take a marketing class, they will teach you that advertising provides a service to the target audience because it provides them with needed information about the availability of the product, and so on. If you accept that, then you've just been propagandized. Sure, there's some truth to that claim, but there is a lot more going on with advertising. Anyone who didn't just fall off the proverbial turnip truck knows that advertising manipulates people into buying all sorts of things that they don't need for all sorts of illegitimate reasons. But they don't spend much time discussing the evils of advertising in marketing classes. What's more, the students and the teacher want to believe that advertising is an honorable activity, so everyone is willing to accept this distorted view of advertising. You've just learned two very important things about propaganda. First, it is partly true. Indeed advertising does give the potential buyer some useful information. For instance, one may not have known that the product existed otherwise, or where to buy it, and so on. But we all know that there's a lot the advertiser doesn't tell us. For instance, that there may be competitors who make better versions of the same thing for less money, or that no one actually needs this product. Second, you learned that propaganda works because the audience wants it to work. The folks in the marketing class want to believe that advertising is a purely wholesome activity with little or no negative side.

1. **Propaganda** - a simple definition

Propaganda is that which is sent from one individual to another and is not true when taken as a whole.

Goebbels insisted that Nazi propaganda be as accurate as possible. That is very interesting, because people think of propaganda as nothing but a pack of lies. Because propaganda is often true, at least to a degree, people more easily succumb to it.

The term "propaganda" embraces the following: psychological action, psychological warfare, reeducation and brainwashing, public and human relations, and advertising.

Basic features of propaganda

Propaganda is a form of myth

1. Example: "Communist propaganda" The very term is propaganda. It creates the myth that anything a communist says is propaganda. It also implies that anything non-communists say is not propaganda.
2. Example: "Marlboro cigarettes" One cannot think about Marlboro cigarettes without thinking of cowboys and the American west. And yet they are manufactured on the east coast. Tobacco isn't grown in the west. It is likely that most people who buy them are not cowboys. The image is nothing more than a created myth that is artificially associated with this brand.

Propaganda works only when the target audience wants it to work

1. If you ever saw propaganda that seemed ridiculous to you, chances are that it didn't work because you didn't want it to work. Remember the Ford Mustang ad where the lonely accountant buys a Mustang, and suddenly girls chase him down the street? Nobody thinks that will happen, right? Well, sales of Mustangs went up in correlation to the ad campaign.

Education is a prerequisite for propaganda.

Students are inadvertently conditioned to be receptive to propaganda by their schools. How can this be?

It all starts with the parents' appropriate admonition, "Always listen to your teacher." Then they go to school, and here's what happens;

1. Students absorb large quantities of second-hand, unverifiable information.
2. Students are made to feel that they should have an opinion on every important question. Most of these issues are very complex, so the student falls prey to the propaganda of those whom they trust.
3. Students feel capable of judging the merits of these opinions for themselves. In most cases they haven't learned how to evaluate these opinions.

It is not that schools are evil. It is an unintended byproduct of the system. The real problems come when the student leaves school. Other sources of propaganda become the "teacher." The student applies the same principles of school to other media, such as the television, radio, magazines, and so forth. The three things listed above happen to every student in every type of school. And almost every person has gone to school. So almost every member of modern society is conditioned by the school to be receptive to propaganda.

Stockholm Syndrome The event, and What is the Stockholm Syndrome? (See extra pages in this section.)

Total Propaganda

1. Total propaganda is a phenomenon which takes place when all the media act together and bring about a complete change in perspective of the weltanschauung (paradigm) of the society. Almost no one disagrees with the belief. In fact, few people are even aware that they have the belief.
2. For instance, Americans are totally propagandized to believe that science can ultimately solve any problem.

Vertical and Horizontal Propaganda

1. Vertical propaganda is that which comes directly from the source to the target audience. It is analogous to lightning striking the ground. Examples are any advertisement, a campaign speech given by the candidate, press releases from political action groups.
2. Horizontal propaganda takes place when the vertical propaganda has taken hold among a few members of the target audience. It then spreads among the group, either by word of mouth or by example. It is analogous to a fire spreading from the point of the lightning strike. This is the bandwagon effect.
3. Both vertical and horizontal propaganda are needed for the propaganda to be effective.

Reinforcing function of propaganda

1. Propaganda also serves to reinforce beliefs. For instance, people who listen to Rush Limbaugh are mostly those who already agree with his perspective. His function is to help maintain and strengthen the beliefs of the converted..

Modalities

1. Defined: Modalities are words which indicate the level of certainty with which a claim can be made.
- Every claim has some probability of being true. Some claims are true beyond any reasonable doubt. For instance, we are quite certain that the earth is roughly a sphere. Other claims are not so certain. For instance, "There is life on other planets." There might be, but no one really knows. If someone says, "There's no doubt about it, there is life on other planets," they used a modality which is too high. If someone says, "There's no doubt about it, there is life on Earth," they've used an appropriate modality. "There's no doubt about it" is the modality in this case.

It is important to use the proper modality. You don't want to overstep your evidentiary limits. In other words, don't say "certainly" if you can't prove the claim with certainty.

High modalities

1. When someone uses a high modality, they are saying that the truth of the claim is certain.
2. Examples of high modality indicators;

Certainly, definitely, there is no doubt about it, without question, absolutely, for sure, beyond a doubt, positively, necessarily

3. Examples of sentences with high modalities.

No question about it, the car needs a valve job.

Absolutely, the defendant was not at the scene of the crime.

All men are mortal (Note that the absence of any qualifying words indicate a high modality.)

4. Claims with high modalities require deductive arguments to prove them.

Low modalities

1. When someone uses a low modality, they are saying that the truth of the claim is likely, but not certain.

2. Examples of low modality indicators;

Probably, possibly, there's a good chance that, perhaps, maybe, more than likely, might be

3. Examples of sentences with low modalities.

I will probably go to Yale when I finish junior college.

There might be life on other planets.

There's a chance of rain by morning.

4. Claims with low modalities require only inductive arguments to support them.

5. Degrees of probability

High modalities are limited to certainty. But there is quite a range for low modalities from almost certain to almost impossible. Here's a guideline for the range of low modalities

99% ± Virtually certain: overwhelming evidence in its favor. Example: The law of gravity

90% ± Highly probable: very good evidence in its favor.

70% ± Probable: sufficient evidence in its favor. Example: Most medicines have to pass this test to be approved.

50% ± Possible: either no evidence or equal evidence for both sides. The Packers will kick off this Sunday. (A coin toss determines which team kicks off just before the game.)

30% ± Improbable: insufficient evidence in its favor. Example: That numerology helps people rise to fame and fortune.

10% ± Highly improbable: very little evidence in its favor. Example: The theory that Jesus spent his early years studying with a Hindu guru.

1% ± Virtually impossible: almost no evidence in its favor. Example: The existence of unicorns.