

# **Propaganda: A Universal Component of Modern Society**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the course of teaching various communications classes and College of the Air Force courses, the topic of propaganda often comes up. It's always interesting and the students and myself wish there was a way to pursue this topic. Unfortunately, there never seems to be time or place in the curriculum to fit in such a unit. The Yale-New Haven/Houston Teachers Institute program gives me the opportunity to create a propaganda unit that could be employed on a senior high school level. It could, with adaptation, be used on the junior high level as well.

Once the opportunity was given, the true problem of teaching a propaganda section on a high school level became apparent. To "talk" about propaganda in an informal discussion was very different from a structured unit. A two-week segment was selected for its brevity, as many curricula do not allow much, if any, open time slots. This unit could also be split into weeklong slots as well.

First, I had to consider what I wanted the students to learn or gain from such a unit. The objective(s) which, without thought, seemed apparent, were not readily available. With a small group of high school students, what did I want to achieve? What was even possible? It was critical that the class could recognize propaganda directed at them and their community in general, but what would that involve? Ultimately, many paths came to one terminal point. If the target audience could identify propaganda directed towards them, understand the purpose of this assault; then, maybe, the effect of the "brainwashing" could be neutralized or, at least, diminished. This would inform and "empower" a new group of voters and leaders. (In point of fact, I personally was not sure if this was enough. Evidence indicates that the knowledge that one is being manipulated does not make the person [or persons] immune to the effect. Moreover, I am not certain that a core group of informed voters will [or even can] make much of a difference. However, upon reflection, it became apparent that most teaching is merely giving students the knowledge and skills to make their own informed, intelligent choices. And, having knowledge offers options that ignorance does not.) To accomplish these aforementioned goals, several objectives seemed inevitable: an understanding of what constitutes propaganda (defining), recognizing it (superficially), knowing how it is constructed, understanding why it is applied and *recognizing* it (knowing it in its many guises). This may seem redundant or disorganized, but will be explained later.

When considering the problem, it was apparent that propaganda must first be defined. Most students, and the public at large, have a vague understanding of the subject, but a clear, crisp definition is usually unavailable to them. To define *propaganda* a variety of

activities may be employed. These might include some or all of the following: asking students to write or share a definition, giving examples of propaganda in their everyday world, doing research in appropriate areas, etc. Eventually, a student-derived definition of propaganda will be polished, clarified and accepted as valid. But, the teacher will, through guided discussions, lead them to a standard definition as derived in the first chapter of *Propaganda and Persuasion* by Jowett and O'Donnell.

The activities would include group work, student led discussions, showing snippets of the film *Triumph of the Will* and all of *Propaganda: a Definition*. Objectives for the definition phase might be as follows:

#### I. Defining Propaganda

- A. Students will identify the term "brainwashing" as an archaic label for a type of propaganda used during the post war period.
- B. Students will explore propaganda as the teaching of blind traditions.
- C. Students will see many taught community values as a form of propaganda.
- D. Students will identify other elements of our culture as forms of propaganda.
- E. Ultimately, a standard definition may be constructed: "Propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perception, manipulate cognition and direct behavior towards a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett and O'Donnell).

The next step is to understand the mechanism of propaganda. But wait, you say, how can students study this without first identifying the propaganda around them? You may remember in the opening, a simple thesis gave steps that seemed either disorganized or redundant. I said I would explain this discrepancy later. Okay, so later is now.

In initial discussions of this unit, using my students' assistance in its creation, it became clear that at a certain level, most intelligent high school students knew about propaganda; it was used on them frequently and they could readily give examples. However, it became clear that, though certain political messages and most advertising campaigns were clearly recognized, the more subtle, and most potentially dangerous, applications were not. At that moment, it became crystal clear that it was in this area where the real focus lay. Albeit, I was not sure that success in this area was even attainable. But, using my students' examples of propaganda as a starting point, the next logical phase appeared to be understanding the mechanisms of this all-pervasive phenomenon. Then, through a hands-on experience of its inner workings, a deeper awareness of thought modification might be achieved.

It is imperative that a knowledge of the mechanisms of how propaganda works and how these methods are put into effect must be understood. Showing the film *The Night That Panicked America* might be an excellent starting point. Questions and group discussions focusing on how this event could have happened, what particulars could trigger certain psychological reactions and, of course, the role of mass media in affecting

perceptions would be employed. These activities, and others, will lead to students recognizing the mechanisms of propaganda. Students might be guided in class discussions and by fielding a few carefully chosen questions.

On their own, students could easily discover that some of the mechanisms of propaganda might include:

1. Grab the audience's interest
2. Target the gullible or most vulnerable first; then, target the vulnerable aspects in the nature of all
3. Exaggerate certain aspects of the issue while minimizing other areas
4. Answer all questions, but answer in a roundabout way and tell the audience what they want to hear
5. Make it believable
6. Exaggerate/lie
7. People believe what they see and hear via TV, radio, and newspaper (mass media)
8. Whatever viable answers your students can generate should be acceptable.
9. The teacher may guide the students, if their discussions have not already done so, to include the basic formal components of propaganda such as band-wagoning, testimonials, scare tactics, slanting, etc.

An activity that would further help students understand the mechanisms of propaganda in their everyday lives is to have students identify the elements of propaganda they may already have suffered under, and have students deconstruct this propaganda. Students could pick any form that they have previously recognized or discussed or move on to new examples. In groups or individually, they can begin to analyze the selected example by first examining the technique(s) employed. (These will come from the list previously generated by student/teacher interactions). Hopefully, students will move onto more esoteric methods. For example, some will notice that a simple magazine ad not only uses the previously mentioned methods in its construction, but also employs subtleties in the picture content, colors, shapes, etc. to create an eye pathway to lead attention to words or to the message. They will see that subliminal messaging exists in a variety of ways. They may deconstruct TV ads, political ads, etc. in much the same approach. And, it is hoped, these activities will make them begin to see propaganda in a more scrutinizing, in-depth manner in all applications, such as in the following:

## II. Applications of Propaganda

- A. Students will list the political applications of propaganda.
- B. Students will list the religious applications of propaganda.
- C. Students will list the ethnic applications of propaganda.
- D. Students will list the advertising applications of propaganda.
- E. Students will list the educational applications of propaganda.
- F. Students will list the other applications of propaganda.

The next logical step would be to let students put the knowledge they have learned into application. Only by doing this can it be proven they have a firm grasp of the material and it helps solidify certain concepts and learned skills that may still be partially unclear.

WARNING! WARNING! DANGER WILL ROBINSON!!!!!! My students know that in a certain point in my lectures comes the disclaimer. This usually comes when I give notes on an author, movement, etc. that is non-Christian, Atheistic, Communistic, pro-abortion, etc. It usually goes something like "You need to know the background, *but* the views expressed are not necessarily the views of this teacher, the school, school district, etc. So your parents don't have to call complaining that I am teaching atheism, communism, etc." My students know it as the "cover your butt" disclaimer, and they look forward to the lecture that follows. When I tell others that I let my students put a propaganda project into reality, they usually give me an aghast but sympathetic look, shudder and run from me as if I had been accused of witchcraft. Putting what they have learned into practice is essential, but must be handled with appropriate safeguards.

It is paramount that you inform them of similar experiments in the past and how they have gone awry. The event that inspired the movie *The Wave* is always brought up; perhaps, showing sections of that film would be worth the time. Caution them how powerful propaganda is and how they must not abuse it or take it lightly. I always make it clear that I don't want to see a Gestapo unit on campus at the end of this project, nor can they do anything that will harm anyone, any group of students, teachers or anyone else. There is a time limit imposed, and one-to-two page outlines of what they propose to accomplish and the steps used to achieve this goal must be turned in and approved. I keep these outlines on file.

Before they officially propose their experiments, they are required to answer some preliminary questions: What previously studied propaganda techniques might be applicable, who is the target audience and what is the desired goal? Then, some preliminary research must be conducted to provide initial answers. Once these steps have been discussed and incorporated into the outline, students can plan details and specifics. Typically, students find that certain basic techniques work well in these limited scope projects: attract interest, target the gullible, tell people what they want to hear, appear to have complete facts, etc. They are quite aware that their age group is very susceptible to "peer influence"; what people say, their actions, what is viewed as "cool" or "fly", are often modeled. They tell me that these things can easily influence their friends.

After a general outline is turned in and approved, they are given forty-eight to seventy-two hours to put their project into effect. These short time limits minimize the effect of the experiments (intentionally), but could be extended at the teacher's discretion. Some projects, though, due to the nature of the experiment, and/or its relative safety, are given longer periods. Every day of class, each group keeps me abreast of their efforts, progress, etc. This requires no coaxing; the students are eager to share their results. In

almost every case they are amazed at how effective their efforts are—and how simple to accomplish! Students quickly learn that:

1. People will believe almost anything, if it is said in a convincing manner—and often.
2. People don't really want to think for themselves—only a smattering of facts or details are usually required to convince most individuals.
3. People want to be led—they want to believe something that takes responsibility from them or allows them to make fewer decisions.
4. Given time and the previously listed precepts, anything can be accomplished.

Usually, my students enact harmless acts of propaganda: convincing a group of students that an unpopular individual is really cool and persuading a cheer leader or prom queen to ask that person out, or starting a new hair style (which is always ludicrous) and "conning" a group of gullible students into adopting it, etc. They quickly learn that other, more self-serving forms of attitude modification are equally possible, but by that time the experiment is rapidly coming to an end. However, their eyes are starting to open; they ask questions such as, "That time in *Hamlet*, we thought we had taken you off course, but you were leading us to \_\_\_\_\_ all the time." Once their eyes are open, they begin to see many things that were hidden from them before.

It is at this point that the real deciphering of propaganda can begin. One might start by showing a film heavy in propaganda to test their abilities to identify the propagandist's desired goals, the target audience and the techniques employed. Later, in a group format, they will discuss the effectiveness of the film. I have, initially, chosen films for this activity because our students are so audiovisually oriented and because most of their exposure to propaganda comes through visual media. Naturally, as this is a short unit, films are less time consuming; and, as this may be used as an enrichment exercise, students will view films as "fun". Two films that might be contrasted in parts or in their entirety might be *The Green Berets* and *The Deer Hunter*. I have selected these films because both are heavily laden with propaganda, the intent and audience are clear, the techniques are commonly used and both films are most likely to be "new" to my students. Of course, as with all new material, a short historical background of the times is required: the social-political conditions, prevailing attitudes, various factions involved, history of our involvement in Vietnam, etc. Only a few years ago I could assume that most of my students had a father or uncle who had fought in "Nam" and were familiar with the conflict; this is not so any more. As I explain the history of the conflict, the affect of this war on the nineteen year olds that fought there, and the various and shifting attitudes at home, I am always conscious of being objective and not to tell the story through my biases. Other teachers, of course, will pick other films or books for examples.

Once the films have been viewed, (each can be viewed separately or as excerpts in juxtaposition) students will be asked to answer several questions, which can be completed individually, in groups or via class discussions, depending on the dynamics or

academic level of the group. Some starting point activities for the aforementioned films might be:

1. Contrast the propagandist's desired goals in each film.
2. Compare the techniques used in each film; contrast if applicable.
3. Discuss the effectiveness of each effort.

The teacher should find the students quite adept at these skills. Most will easily identify the goals of each respective film, and most will realize that the target audience in each case is the same or a largely over-lapping group. They will probably identify the basic mechanisms in each film in the following, generic format:

*The Green Berets*

- A. Stirring speeches by a famous American hero (John Wayne)
- B. Dialogue espousing noble sounding ideals
- C. Dramatic situations and emotionally charged "shock" footage
- D. Music and scenery underscores theme/emotion, etc.

*The Deer Hunter*

- A. Scenes with high impact: torture scenes in the POW camp, Russian Roulette, the fall of Saigon, the suffering of the families at home, etc.
- B. Juxtaposition of scenes of peace with those of war and destruction
- C. The conveyance that the experience has brought about a form of wisdom, but at a much too exorbitant cost

After this, students can examine more challenging films, analyzing for more subtle techniques. Some potential candidates might include Stone's *JFK*, *The X-Files* movie (or selected TV episodes), etc. Students can de-construct these films for potential impact and interpret the principles at work. They can also compile their observations and analyses in a working compendium of propaganda principles.

The next stage would be to direct students individually, or in small groups, to deconstruct an example of a political speech or rhetoric, an official press release or response, etc. and conclude this activity with a class discussion led by each group or an appointed group spokesperson. This activity may be a two to three day assignment if appropriate. Students will lead the larger, combined group to an understanding of the desired goal, the techniques employed, effectiveness, etc.

This discussion can be utilized by the teacher as a transition point for a final, round table exchange or a unit wrap-up, involving the entire class. This exchange could focus on the propaganda engendered by White House (or local political) press releases, by the similarities in approach exhibited at the local Holocaust Museum and by other racist literature/rhetoric, etc. This dialogue should be largely directed and fueled by the students, not by the teacher acting as "leader". As teachers, we are often tempted to jump

in if the conversation does not move as brilliantly or as quickly as hoped. Students need to be the motive force, with the teacher entering into the discussion only for infrequent guidance or when absolutely necessary. The students sharing ideas and comparing what they have learned—and other observations—will drive this type of lesson home better than any work sheet or teacher-delivered lecture.

Hopefully, the students will end this unit with a better understanding of the pervasiveness of propaganda in their day-to-day lives, better able to recognize the propagandists and their intent, more aware (and hopefully more immune) to their tactics and more able to see the truth behind the smoke screen.

### **NOTE TO TEACHER**

As I finished this unit, a first time fellow in a newly launched Teachers Institute project, I am painfully aware how many loose ends are left untied and how much is still to be learned through trial and error. Each teacher will have to adapt this loose structure to their individual classes, students and environment. For this reason, I have left many options open. I have provided a list of several films from which to pick. Several can be applied to a wide range of interests and age groups. This will also allow the individual teacher to tailor this unit to particular time constraints. A short unit might be used as an enrichment activity, or as a reward after a particularly grueling section of curriculum. It may also be used as an addendum to a history or government class. On the matter of tests and quizzes, I have been purposely silent. In my initial experiment, which took place this spring of 1999 in a technical writing class, I only graded the propaganda project and the oral presentation given at the end of the unit. A written report at the end of the unit, compiling what had been learned and structured as a well-organized research report, was entertained as a future option. For those teachers that need a certain number of daily grades and/or quiz grades, I am not clear how this unit would be applicable. However, I am confident individual classroom instructors could make adaptations to almost any condition or restrictions. A bibliography of materials has been included. Though helpful, it is only a starting point and most teachers will quickly add materials more pertinent to their specific needs. If you use this material, I welcome your observations, comments and feedback.

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#### **A. Films**

1. *Triumph of the Will*
2. *Schindler's List*
3. *Wag the Dog*
4. *US Army Documentary of the Memphis Belle*
5. *The Memphis Belle*
6. *The Night That Panicked America*
7. *Mulan*
8. *The Green Berets*
9. *The Deer Hunter*

#### **B. Personal Interviews**

1. Interview with Marion Wood. (Top turret gunner on the Belle's wing ship)
2. Interview with a holocaust survivor.
3. Visit to the Holocaust museum.

#### **C. Historical Incites**

1. Possible pre-knowledge of Pearl Harbor.
2. Churchill allowing the *Lusitania* to be sunk.
3. Etc.