

“How to Detect Propaganda”

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If Americans are to have a clear understanding of present-day conditions and what to do about them, they must be able to recognize propaganda, to analyze it, and to appraise it.

But what is propaganda?

As generally understood, propaganda is expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends. Thus propaganda differs from scientific analysis. The propagandist is trying to “put something across,” good or bad; whereas the scientist is trying to discover truth and fact. Often the propagandist does not want careful scrutiny and criticism; he wants to bring about a specific action. Because the action may be socially beneficial or socially harmful to millions of people, it is necessary to focus upon the propagandist and his activities the searchlight of scientific scrutiny. Socially desirable propaganda will not suffer from such examination, but the opposite type will be detected and revealed for what it is.

We are fooled by propaganda chiefly because we do not recognize it when we see it. We can more easily recognize propaganda if we are familiar with the seven common propaganda devices. These are:

1. Name Calling,
2. Glittering Generalities
3. Transfer
4. The Testimonial
5. Plain Folks
6. Card Stacking
7. Band wagon.

We are fooled by these devices because they appeal to our emotions rather than to our reason. They make us believe and do something we would not believe or do if we thought about it calmly, dispassionately. In examining these devices, note that they work most effectively at those times when we are too lazy to think for ourselves, and that they also tie into emotions which sway us to be “for” or “against” nations, races, religions, ideals, economic and political policies and practices, and so on through automobiles, cigarettes, electronic equipment, toothpastes, presidents, and wars. With our emotions stirred, it may be fun to be fooled by these propaganda devices, but it is more fun and infinitely more to our interest to know how they work. Lincoln must have had in mind citizens who could balance their emotions with intelligence when he made his remark: “. . . but you can’t fool all the people all of the time.”

“**Name Calling**” is a device to make us form a judgment without examining the evidence on which it should be based. Here the propagandist appeals to our hate and fear by giving “bad names” to those individuals, groups, nations, races, policies, practices, beliefs, and ideals that he would have us condemn and reject. For centuries the name “heretic” was bad. Anybody who dissented from popular or group belief or practice was in danger of being called a heretic and of receiving the punishment of heretics. Today’s bad names include demagogue, dictator, power elite, right wing, illegal alien, radical feminist (and others you can probably think of).

Use of “bad names” without presentation of their essential meaning, without all their pertinent implications, comprises perhaps the most common of all propaganda devices. Those who want to maintain the status quo apply bad names to those who would change it. For example, in the 1930’s the Hearst-owned press applied bad names to communists and socialists. Those who want to change the status quo apply bad names to those who would maintain it. For example, the Sierra Club applies bad names to ranchers and loggers.

“**Glittering Generalities**” is a device by which the propagandist identifies his program with virtue by use of “virtue words.” He appeals to our emotions of love, generosity, and brotherhood. He uses words like freedom, honor, liberty, social justice, public service, loyalty, progress, democracy, the American way, the Constitution. These words suggest shining ideals in which all persons of good will believe. Hence the propagandist, by identifying his individual group, nation, race, policy, belief, or practice with such ideals, seeks to win us to his cause. As Name Calling is a device to make us form judgments to *reject and condemn* without examining the evidence, Glittering Generalities is a device to make us *accept and approve* without examining the evidence. For example, use of the phrases, “right to bear arms,” and “Founding Fathers” may be a device to make us accept viewpoints about gun laws which, if we examined them critically, we would not accept at all.

In the Name Calling and Glittering Generalities devices, words are used to stir up our emotions and to befog our thinking. In one device “bad names” are used to make us mad; in the other “good words” are used to make us glad. The propagandist is most effective in the use of these devices when his words make us create devils to fight or gods to adore. By his use of “bad words” we personify as a “devil” some nation, race, group, individual policy, practice, or ideal; we are made fighting mad to destroy it. By use of “good words” we personify as a godlike idol some nation, race, group, etc.

“**Transfer**” is a device by which the propagandist carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something or someone we respect and revere to something he would have us accept. For example, most of us respect and revere the church and our nation. If the propagandist succeeds in getting church or nation to approve a campaign in behalf of some program, he thereby transfers its authority, sanction, and prestige to that program. Thus we may accept something we might otherwise reject.

In the “Transfer” device symbols are constantly used. The cross represents the Christian church; the flag represents the nation; cartoons like Uncle Sam represent a consensus of public opinion. Those symbols stir emotions. At their very sight, with the speed of light, is aroused the whole complex of feeling we have with respect to church or nation. A cartoonist by having Uncle Sam disapprove a budget for tax relief would have us feel that the whole United States disapproves of such a use of funds. By drawing an Uncle Sam who approves of the same budget item, the cartoonist would have us feel that the American people approve it. Thus the Transfer device is used both for and against causes and ideas.

The “**Testimonial**” is a device to make us accept anything from an herbal supplement or car to a program or national policy. In this device the propagandist makes use of testimonials: “When I feel tired, I take Mom’s Ginseng and have energy to spare.” “We believe that this plan of labor organization is going to be effective and the Marble Stackers Union should be supported.” “I bought a car from Jones Ford and they treated me right.” This device works in reverse also; counter-testimonials may be employed. Seldom are these used against commercial products like herbal supplements or cars, but they are constantly employed in social, economic, and political issues. For example, “We believe that The Marble Stackers Union plan of labor

organization will cost us our jobs and should not be supported.”

“Plain Folks” is a device used by politicians, labor leaders, business executives, and even by ministers and teachers to win our confidence by appearing to be people like ourselves—“just plain folks,” “just an ole country boy/gal,” “just an American citizen.” In election years especially do candidates show their devotion to little children and the common, homey things of life. They ride buses from town to town to campaign. For the network interviewer they raid the refrigerator to find some home-baked pie. They go to barbeque festivals; they attend services at the old white-frame church; they go fishing and play with the dog; they love their mothers. In short, they would win our votes by showing that they’re just as common as the rest of us—“just plain folks”—and therefore wise and good. Business executives are often “plain folks” with the factory workers.

“Card Stacking” is a device in which the propagandist employs all the arts of deception to win our support for himself, his group, nation, race, policy, practice, belief, or ideal. He stacks the cards against the truth. He uses under-emphasis and over-emphasis to dodge issues and evade facts. He offers false testimony. He creates a smokescreen of clamor by raising a new issue when he wants an embarrassing matter forgotten. He draws a red herring across the trail to confuse and divert those in search of facts he does not want revealed. He makes the real appear unreal and the unreal appear real. He lets half-truth masquerade as truth. By the Card Stacking device a mediocre candidate through the “build-up” is made to appear an intellectual titan, a modestly talented singer a probable contender for a Grammy, a worthless herbal concoction a sure-fire key to weight loss. By means of this device propagandists would convince us that a ruthless war of aggression is a crusade for righteousness. Card Stacking employs sham, hypocrisy, effrontery.

“The Band Wagon” is a device to make us follow the crowd, to accept the propagandist’s program en masse. Here his theme is “Everybody’s doing it.” His techniques range from those of pep rally to dramatic spectacle. He hires a hall, fills a stadium, marches a million men. He employs symbols, colors, music, movement, all the dramatic arts. He appeals to the desire, common to most of us, to “follow the crowd.” Because he wants us to “follow the crowd” in masses, he directs his appeal to groups held together by common ties of nationality, religion, race, environment, gender, vocation. Thus propagandists campaigning for or against a program will appeal to us as Catholics, Protestants, Jews or Muslims, as farmers or teachers, as gays or straights. All the artifices of flattery are used to harness the fears and hatreds, prejudices and biases, convictions and ideals common to the group; thus emotion is made to push and pull the group onto the BandWagon. In newspaper articles and in the spoken word this device is also found. “Don’t throw your vote away on Ralph Nader; vote for Gore—he’s sure to win.” Nearly every candidate wins in every election—that is, before the votes are in.

Observe that in all these devices our emotion is the stuff with which propagandists work. Without it they are helpless; with it, harnessing it to their purposes, they can make us glow with pride or burn with hatred; they can make us zealots in behalf of the program they espouse. As we said in the beginning, propaganda is generally understood as the expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends. Without the appeal of our emotions—to our fears and our courage, to our selfishness and unselfishness, to our loves and to our hates—propagandists would influence few opinions and few actions.

To say this is not to condemn emotion, an essential part of life, or to assert that all predetermined ends of propagandists are “bad.” However, as intelligent citizens we do not want propagandists to utilize our emotions, even to the attainment of “good” ends, without our knowing what is going on. We do not want to be “used” in the attainment of ends we may later consider “bad.”

We do not want to be gullible; we do not want to be fooled; we do not want to be duped, even in a “good” cause. We want to know the facts and among these is included the fact of the utilization of our emotions.

Keeping in mind the seven common propaganda devices, turn to today’s newspapers and almost immediately you can spot examples of them all. At election time or during any campaign, Plain Folks and Band Wagons are common. Card Stacking is hardest to detect because it is adroitly executed or because we lack the information (often statistics or data) necessary to nail the lie. A little practice with the daily newspapers in detecting these propaganda devices soon enables us to detect them elsewhere—in television, films, books, magazines and in expressions of labor unions, business groups, churches, schools, political parties.