Authorship and Origins of the Seven Propaganda Devices: A Research Note

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The analytic construct of the seven propaganda devices—name calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon—long has been familiar in the field of communication. The following documentary account of the seven-devices framework, extending and focusing my previous explications of the subject, clarifies who first developed the format, how it came to be published, why it both captured immediate interest and longstanding attention, and how later it encountered social and ideological conditions that variously facilitated or impeded its diffusion and use.

Most ubiquitous and long-lasting among the many frameworks for propaganda criticism and analysis has been the construct of the seven propaganda devices introduced under the auspices of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in 1937. Not only did the seven-device format become a standard component of inter-world-war propaganda analysis in the United States, but the rubric has been reprinted, cited, alluded to, critiqued, or reworked constantly during the last 65 years.[1] Despite the great and lasting attention paid to the seven propaganda devices, however, the story of this framework's origins has yet to be fully related. Although the larger history of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis may be found in my earlier work, *Propaganda and Democracy,* this present research note permits me to concentrate upon the process by which Clyde R. Miller, progressive journalist and educator, originated the framework, published it, and defended it against sundry criticism.[2]

Birth of the Seven-Devices Framework

The seven-devices framework of propaganda analysis first gained wide national attention in America when this critical construct appeared in November 1937 as the substance of an unsigned article in the second issue of *Propaganda Analysis,* the bulletin of the newly chartered Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA). "We are fooled by propaganda," the IPA's article explained, "chiefly because we don't recognize it

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when we see it." Continuing, the bulletin recommended that the reader become "familiar with the seven common propaganda devices," to wit:

1. Name calling–The propagandist conjures hate or fear by attaching unattractive labels "to those individuals, groups, nations, races, policies, practices, beliefs, and ideals which he would have us condemn and reject." Examples of such stigmatizing names prone to use without clarification or analysis were "heretic" and "communist."
2. Glittering generalities–The propagandist associates his or her program with "virtue words" such as "truth, freedom, honor, liberty, social justice, public service, the right to work, loyalty, progress, democracy, the American way, Constitution defender." As with name calling, the idea was to make people form a thoughtless judgment under the influence of an emotional impression.
3. Transfer–Here "the propagandist carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something we respect and revere to something he would have us accept." Typical were efforts to establish identification between a political project and the audience's reverence for national or religious symbolism.
4. Testimonial–Here the propagandist links an idea or program to some specific, favored person or institution. For instance, a point in a labor-management dispute might be linked to ideas put forth by the C.I.O.
5. Plain folk–Persuaders and leaders present themselves as "just plain folks" to establish an identity with ordinary Americans. Through language and action, elites give themselves the common touch with the objective of conveying a favorable impression about their ideas and proposals.
6. Card stacking–The propagandist uses overemphasis and underemphasis to put a calculated spin on his or her ideas or proposals. Distortions and omissions throw up a smoke screen such that the audience forgets inconvenient information and embraces half truths.
7. Band wagon–Here the propagandist works to have people "follow the crowd," to accept an idea or plan because "everybody's doing it." Focus often is on appealing to ties of nation, religion, race, region, sex, or occupation.[3]

The IPA's seven propaganda devices appeared at a time when the nation's opinion leaders shared a concern that Depression-era charges and counter-charges were placing democracy itself in peril. Alarm about the public's seeming vulnerability to extremist propagandists was what motivated Edward A. Filene, the department-store magnate and liberal philanthropist, to guarantee three-year's funding for an anti-propaganda institute proposed by journalist/educator Clyde R. Miller.[4] The seven devices of propaganda detection were the first—and most prominent—of several anti-propaganda critical constructs offered by the Filene-Miller Institute to help

render public opinion more resistant to propaganda's seductions. American opinion leaders immediately latched onto the seven-devices format as a tangible tool for defusing the era's welter of words. The archival records of the IPA reveal a deluge of reprint requests from newspapers, patriotic groups, authors, lecturers, ministers, and teachers.

Educators were particularly attracted to the seven-devices framework, and requests to reprint and apply this propaganda-detection format came from faculty in the fields of English, journalism, logic, psychology, sociology, and speech. Edgar Dale, media educator and IPA board member, congratulated the Institute's director, Clyde R. Miller, for publishing a system of anti-propaganda detection that "takes a number of very complicated fallacies in logic and reduces them to terms that a fourteen year old child can understand." Dale later recalled that "the quick popularity of the anti-propaganda movement was caused by the fact that there were seven neat, easily understood principles set up." Miller's construct was catchy, indeed, not only packaging otherwise miscellaneous concepts under evocative metaphorical and synecdochical rubrics, but also amalgamating the mélange with the magic number of seven. So it was not surprising that, as the framework chained out into the wider culture, students at Evander Childs High School in the Bronx contributed a "modern morality play" entitled "Snow White and the Seven Propaganda Devices." This parody's theme chorus put forth the refrain, "Oh, we are the seven devices, / We turn up in times of crisis; / We play upon your feeling, / We set your brain a-reeling."[5]

Not that everyone applauded the IPA's easily understood and easy-to-apply devices for detecting propaganda. Robert S. Lynd, Columbia sociologist and IPA board member, conveyed to Miller the complaint by a precocious undergraduate student that the November 1937 issue of *Propaganda Analysis* containing the seven devices "reads like a high-school freshman's attempt to brief one of [Harold] Lasswell's books." In passing along this comment to Miller, Lynd added his own concern about whether such a "general sort of material" would win the Institute a lasting following. Although Lynd's cautionary note proved prophetic, the IPA's new propaganda detection system otherwise prompted great enthusiasm in a time when newspaper headlines screamed of crisis at home and war abroad, and when the specter of totalitarian "isms" weighed on the national psyche. The IPA's propaganda devices found a place in classrooms across the nation such that, within a few years, an estimated one million school children were using the Institute's approach for detecting and combating propaganda.[6]

CLYDE R. MILLER

Whence sprang the seven propaganda devices? Available documentary and oral history evidence demonstrates that the author of the seven-devices format was Clyde R. Miller, progressive journalist, publicist for Columbia University, and faculty

member in the university's Teachers College. Although the articles in the IPA's bulletin were unsigned, the Institute's extant records show that Miller, who oversaw editorial operations during the IPA's initial year, was the author of the first five issues of *Propaganda Analysis.* Miller drew the material for these articles from his lectures prepared for classes at Teachers College.[7] Furthermore, Violet Edwards Lavine, Miller's assistant at both Teachers College and at the IPA, attributed the seven devices format entirely to her mentor, Miller.[8]

Miller developed the seven-devices format at Columbia, where, among other things, he taught courses in "Public Opinion and Education" and "Propaganda Analysis in General Education."[9] In years previous to the IPA's November 1937 bulletin, Miller had published variations of the seven-devices format in other educational venues. For instance, he served in 1935 as a member of a commission constituted by the American Association of School Administrators with the charge to study "the relation of education to the public welfare." To the commission's eventual report, Miller contributed an early draft of his evolving construct that at this time included six propaganda devices. In this precursor article, probably finalized in fall 1936 (to judge from the dates of Miller's citation of periodicals), the plain-folks technique was omitted and the transfer device appeared under the rubric of "flag waving." Another likeminded application of the full seven devices appeared at about the same time under the byline of Miller and his assistant, Violet Edwards. Specifically addressed to campaign oratory of the 1936 presidential contest, this article similarly employed the moniker of flag waving in preference to that of transfer.[10]

It seems clear that Miller, who in fall 1937 was greatly pressed by the need for material with which to fill early issues of the bulletin, simply adapted some of his previously prepared educational materials for *Propaganda Analysis.* It proved unfortunate for Miller, however, that his most influential educational/critical construct gained national currency via an unsigned article. When the seven-devices format was appropriated later as an organizing principle for the Institute's first book, *The Fine Art of Propaganda,* the result was to dilute Miller's personal credit for the innovation. This book, written by sociologist Alfred McClung Lee and anthropologist Elizabeth Briant Lee, provided a detailed application of the seven propaganda devices to the radio addresses of Father Charles Coughlin. The work won much favorable attention for the IPA from political commentators and social scientists. The success of the book, however, proved a mixed blessing for Miller, who was chagrined that the most significant critical use of the IPA's propaganda-detection devices appeared in a work for which others gained credit as authors.[11]

THEORY, PRAXIS, AND THE SEVEN DEVICES

Notwithstanding popular acceptance of and acclaim for Miller's seven propaganda devices, the educators and social scientists who made up the IPA's board

never were entirely satisfied with this critical framework. Questions occasionally were raised as to whether teaching students to label certain language as propagandistic provided, on the one hand, for a transfer of learning to new situations without, on the other hand, creating a general attitude of cynicism and skepticism about everything.[12] For a time, the Institute was able to contain this criticism by supplementing the seven detection devices with, among other frameworks, the life history method, whereby students analyzed the influences that had shaped their own opinions. Further, the IPA acknowledged that simple detection of propaganda was not enough in the struggle to maintain democracy in an era of mass persuasion. Time and again, the organization emphasized that intelligent Americans would need to make a separate judgment as to whether a given propaganda was directed to a socially useful end (e.g., promotion of democratic tolerance) or a socially damaging one (e.g., misleading consumers or voters).[13] In addition to being vulnerable on pedagogical and social grounds, the catchy seven-devices format clearly carried the ethos of a "gimmick," in the words of Harold Lavine, who succeeded Miller as head of the Institute's editorial operations.[14] However, as with other weaknesses, this limitation proved not to be a serious drawback so long as currents of political and academic opinion favored the broad-scale detection of propaganda.

Ultimately, it was ideology more than pedagogy or theory that undermined the educational currency, social popularity, and academic credence of Miller's seven propaganda devices. The devices lost their privileged status as a result of a political turn among liberals from isolationism to interventionism, accompanied by a turn in social science toward quantitative methodology as the marker of proper research. The seven-devices format worked well when opinion leaders were in general agreement that the public needed to become more skeptical about agitation and self-serving symbolism found in the era's mass movements and in Father Coughlin's radio addresses. However, the kind of broad-gauged assault against propaganda represented by the seven propaganda devices began to seem out of place when opinion leaders became preoccupied with channeling public sentiment against Hitler's threat to Europe.

When applied to the war of words between Britain and Nazi Germany, the IPA's goal to uncover the full spectrum of propaganda found the organization pointing to self-serving language and strategy of the democracies as well as the totalitarians. Columnist Max Lerner faulted the IPA's effort to take on the propaganda of all comers for allegedly turning Americans into a "nation of amateur detectives looking for concealed propaganda in every effort to awaken America to the real nature of Nazi world strategy."

The result was a debilitating "universal skepticism" that helped Hitler by inducing a "collective indecision." Lewis Mumford and others weighed in with similar criticisms.[15] Because the seven-devices format was by far the Institute's best known critical construct, this educational framework lost some of its authority as a valid

approach for protecting public opinion from propagandists. The criticism that the seven devices promoted an unhealthy universal skepticism—without being able to distinguish good from bad propaganda—led many teachers to cast about for other frameworks from which to teach critical thinking. Most settled on formats that, on the one hand, avoided directly confronting society's leading persuaders and intractable problems and, on the other, emphasized the internal psychology of the thinker (e.g., the need to avoid an emotional response to issues). By 1942 curricular propaganda study had metamorphosed from the former focus upon assessing the vested interests that lay behind alternate information sources surrounding current controversies to a new emphasis on exercises that involved relating premises to conclusions in nonpolitical and/or hypothetical situations.[16]

Not only did the seven-devices format offend against the desire to mobilize a unified wartime opinion, but the construct also rubbed up against the effort to improve the scholarly credentials of academic social science. The seven-devices approach supplied neither a set of methodological tools suitable for quantitative research nor a body of powerful conceptual insights capable of enriching a grand theory of social influence. During the 1930s the term "science" was taking on an increasingly methodological cast as part of a process by which the social sciences endeavored to distinguish themselves from the humanities. In the nineteenth century science generally had been understood as an organized body of knowledge pertaining to a subject. With advances in experimental method later in the century, "science" began to be associated with those particular methods of research favored in the natural sciences. The newer notion of science as quantitative and experimental method fit well the endeavor of twentieth-century Young Turks in psychology, sociology, and political science to separate themselves from speculative philosophers and starry-eyed reformers in the academy. By the early 1940s cutting-edge social science no longer included case study analysis (such as the IPA's study of Father Coughlin) or the application of knowledge to currently felt social problems.[17]

The seven propaganda devices were particularly vulnerable to denigration according to newer notions of science as method. The framework was an obvious patchwork loosely linked by Miller's cautionary note that each of the seven appealed more to emotion than to reason. From the standpoint of quantitative researchers interested in "media effects," the seven devices seemed to add little of value. For those interested in calibrating the effects of messages, it made little difference whether the measured results flowed from communications labeled "education" or "propaganda." With measured effects rather than broad-scale propaganda detection now the objective, the seven devices were expendable because the two phenomena of education and propaganda were not to be usefully distinguished when viewed merely as stimuli for inducing effects. Moreover, experimental researchers quickly determined that the seven devices, which were designed as a critical, heuristic framework, did not reliably prevent propaganda from producing attitude change "effects."[18] In addition,

because it was obvious that Miller's seven devices were overlapping categories, they were not useful for the kind of quantitative content analysis being developed by Harold Lasswell.

Vulnerable as not useful for quantitative research, Miller's seven devices also suffered when viewed from the standpoint of grand social theory. Although vectors of experimentation and quantification highlighted the direction of leading-edge social science in the 1930s and 1940s, many prominent social scientists continued to pursue their interest in grand social theory of the kind being developed by George Herbert Mead and Talcott Parsons. Mead's theory of the significant symbol and Parsons's typology of social roles and institutional types were valued for their capacity to enrich social theory if not to confirm it. In this connection, the seven devices also proved out of step with the social science mainstream. In his November 1937 article, Miller had provided only a thin description of each propaganda device, and the IPA never improved significantly upon this original presentation. The Frankfurt School critic Leo Lowenthal and his coauthor, Norbert Guterman, favorably credited the Lees' application of the seven devices to Coughlin's addresses as usefully eliciting certain important rhetorical devices used by agitators. However, the conceptual plainness of Miller's construct was palpable. Leonard Doob, psychologist of propaganda and IPA board member in the 1930s, recalled that he would not have dreamed of using the seven devices in a scholarly treatment of social influence in the years after World War II. In contrast, Doob credited Marxist criticism as useful to social science because this kind of critique rested on a complex and developed theoretical substructure.[19]

Although denigrated during the decades when formal logic held sway in the pedagogy of critical thinking and social science seemed poised to expunge historical-critical methods, the seven propaganda devices survived the 1940s and 1950s to reassert themselves in bibliographies of the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate periods. In the seventh decade of their entry into American critical theory and praxis, the seven propaganda devices, as earlier noted, now resonate in popular works, in college and high-school textbooks, and on the Internet. Because the devices remain fundamental for those who would pursue theory or practice in the field of communication, it is well to reflect upon both the origins of the seven devices and upon the vicissitudes, historical and ideological, that have brought them into the lexicon of contemporary criticism. Of particular interest is that, although the devices were promulgated and promoted under the auspices of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, it is possible now to give Clyde R. Miller full credit for having developed and introduced our field's familiar framework for the broad detection of propaganda content. Further exploration of the circumstances by which Miller's seven devices fell into and out of favor adds to our understanding of critical constructs generally, notably how the popularity and credibility of a conceptual framework owes much to social and ideological conditions. Miller's methodology was, despite

its simplicity and preoccupation with message form, almost universally welcomed in the agitational context of 1937. When a broadbased detection of propaganda seemed an obstacle to rallying the nation against Hitler, liberal opinion leaders turned against the framework. At this time social scientists were wont to abandon Miller's approach to separating honest and dishonest communication when their own focus became measured media effects, per se, and quantitative data about message content. Social ferment of the last 30 years, as focused by today's critical turn in communication scholarship, has established a fertile ground for detecting instances of propaganda. Accompanied at the millennium by concerns that various of democracy's underpinnings are under fire—tolerance, civility, community feelings—succeeding decades may well produce a further upsurge of interest in Miller's venerable seven propaganda devices.

NOTES

1. Reprintings include "The Iconography of Propaganda Analysis," *ETC* 52 (1995): 13–17. Citations include Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion,* 2d ed. (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1992), 182–83; James E. Combs and Dan Nimmo, *The New Propaganda* (New York: Longman, 1993), 193–94; and a high-school social-studies textbook, David C. King, Norman McRae and Jaye Zola, *The United States and Its People* (Addison- Wesley, 1993), 635 (and elsewhere). Illustrating the diffusion of the devices, psychologists Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1992) treat two of the seven ("glittering generalities and "bandwagon") without directly citing the construct. The devices are featured prominently on the Propaganda Analysis Home Page (see redwood@u.washington.edu). Critiques include Thomas M. Steinfatt, "Evaluating Approaches to Propaganda Analysis," *ETC* 36 (1979): 157–80. Reworkings include the "Intensify/Downplay Schema" of Hugh Rank, *Persuasion Analysis* (Park Forest, IL: Counter-Propaganda Press, 1988), 132–35.
2. J. Michael Sproule, *Propaganda and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
3. "How to Detect Propaganda," *Propaganda Analysis* 1, no. 2 (November 1937): 5–7 (bound volume).
4. Edward L. Bernays, *Biography of an Idea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 443–44; Kirtley Mather to Roy F. Bergengren, December 16, 1941, Papers of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, privately held by Alfred McClung Lee, Short Hills, N.J. (later placed in the New York Public Library); hereafter cited as IPAP.
5. Edgar Dale to Clyde Miller, November 1, 1937, IPAP; Dale to author, April 16, 1982; *Newsweek,* April 3, 1939, 32.
6. Robert Lynd to Clyde Miller, c. November 1937, IPAP; *New York Times,* February 21, 1941, 1.
7. For instance, Miller to Good Will Fund board, October 28, 1937 and Miller to William Leiserson, c. October 21, 1937, IPAP.
8. Violet Edwards Lavine, interview by author, Phoenix, Ariz., December 11–12, 1982.
9. In IPAP: Clyde R. Miller, "Education 200E - Public Opinion and Education" (syllabus, c. 1939/1940) and "Propaganda Analysis in General Education" (syllabus, c. 1939); Miller to Alfred McClurg Lee, December 6, 1946 and March 13, 1947. Also Miller, "Some Comments on Propaganda Analysis and the Science of Democracy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 5 (1941): 660.

10. "Annual Report of the Executive Secretary, St. Louis Meeting, 1936," in *The Social Studies Curriculum,* 14th Yearbook, American Association of School Administrators (Washington, D.C.: Department of Superintendence of the National Education Association, 1936), 376; [Clyde R. Miller], "The Nature of Public Opinion," ch. 11 in *The Improvement of Education: Its Interpretation for Democracy,* 15th Yearbook, American Association of School Administrators (Washington, D.C.: Department of Superintendence of the National Education Association, 1937), 152–63; Miller and Violet Edwards, "The Intelligent Teacher's Guide Through Campaign Propaganda," *The Clearing House* 11, no. 2 (October 1936): 69–77.
11. Alfred McClurg Lee and Elizabeth B. Lee, eds. *The Fine Art of Propaganda* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939); Clyde Miller to Alfred Lee, February 24, 1958, IPAP.
12. In IPAP: Minutes of a special meeting, February 10, 1940; Malcolm MacLean to Clyde Miller, August 30, 1940. Also, "The Institute's Study Program," *Propaganda Analysis* 2, no. 13 (September 1, 1939): 108–9 (bound volume); Leonard W. Doob, interview by author, New Haven, Conn., May 20–21, 1982.
13. For instance, the following issues *Propaganda Analysis* 1, no. 1 (October 1937): 1; v. 4, no. 8 (June 24, 1941): 6–7; v. 4, no. 13 (January 9, 1942): 4–5. Also, Lee and Lee, *Fine Art,* and Edgar Dale and Norma Vernon, "Introduction," *Propaganda Analysis: An Annotated Bibliography* (Columbus, Ohio: Bureau of Educational Research, May 1940), i.
14. Harold Lavine, interview by author, Phoenix, Ariz., December 11–12, 1982.
15. Max Lerner, *Ideas for the Ice Age* (New York: Viking, 1941), 185–88; Lewis Mumford, "The Corruption of Liberalism," *New Republic* 102, no. 18 (April 29, 1940): 568–73, cf. Mumford, *Values for Survival* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946), 39n; Bruce L. Smith, "Propaganda Analysis and the Science of Democracy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 5 (1941): 250–59; William Garber, "Propaganda Analysis—To What Ends?" *American Journal of Sociology* 48 (1942): 240–45; Curtis D. MacDougall, *Understanding Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 96–97.
16. Gladys Graham to Clyde Miller, January 7, 1940, IPAP; Francis J. Brown, "Editorial," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 15 (1942): 317–19. Cf. Elmer Ellis, ed., *Education Against Propaganda,* 7th Yearbook (n.p.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1937) and Howard R. Anderson, ed., *Teaching Critical Thinking in the Social Studies,* 13th Yearbook (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1942).
17. Dorothy Ross, "The Development of the Social Sciences," in *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860–1920,* ed. Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 107–38; John Higham, "The Schism in American Scholarship," *American Historical Review* 72 (1966): 1–21.
18. Gordon W. Allport and Helene R. Veltfort, "Social Psychology and the Civilian War Effort," *Journal of Social Psychology* 18 (1943): 190; Rex M. Collier, "The Effect of Propaganda upon Attitude Following a Critical Examination of the Propaganda Itself," *Journal of Social Psychology* 20 (1944): 3–17; Lloyd Morrisett, typescript, c. 1954, box 3, Papers of Carl I. Hovland, Yale University Library; Roger Brown, *Words and Things* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958), 301–6. Also Roy V. Wood, James J. Bradac, Sara A. Barnhart, and Edward Kraft, "The Effect of Learning about Techniques of Propaganda on Subsequent Reaction to Propagandistic Communications," *Speech Teacher* 19 (1970): 49–53.
19. George H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934); Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action,* 2d ed. (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1949 [1937]; Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Pacific Books, 1970 [1949]), xv; Doob, interview.