
PROPAGANDA

Author(s): Neil Postman

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OF ALL THE WORDS WE USE to talk about talk, *propaganda* is perhaps the most mischievous. The essential problems its use poses, and never resolves, are reflected in the following definition, given by no less a personage than the late Aldous Huxley:

There are two kinds of propaganda—rational propaganda in favor of action that is consonant with the enlightened self-interest of those who make it and those to whom it is addressed, and nonrational propaganda that is not consonant with anybody's enlightened self-interest, but is dictated by, and appeals to, passion.

This definition is, of course, filled with confusion and even nonsense, both of which are uncharacteristic of Huxley and only go to show how *propaganda* can bring the best of us down.

To begin with, Huxley makes a distinction between “good” and “bad” propaganda on the basis of the cause being espoused. If what we are told is good for everybody, then propaganda is “rational.” If it is bad for everybody, it is nonrational. But how are we to know what is good and what is bad for everybody? In most instances, this is far from self-evident, and not even an Aldous Huxley can say for sure what is enlightened and what is not. Moreover, the information we might need to decide the issue is often not available to us. Suppose, for example, a television commercial tells us that a certain drug will help to relieve nagging backaches. That would appear to be in everybody's self-interest, thus, rational propaganda. But let us also suppose it is later discovered that in addition to relieving nagging backaches, the drug also relieves you of a healthy liver. Was the commercial “good” propaganda at the time you heard it or was it “bad”? Perhaps it was “good” when you heard it but *became* “bad” when you learned of the drug's side-effects. But since it was never in anybody's self-interest to

*Neil Postman is Editor of *Et cetera* and professor of Media Ecology at New York University. This article is excerpted from his book, *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*.

use the drug, then wasn't the commercial "bad" propaganda to begin with?

And now let us suppose that in combination with another substance, the drug is rendered harmless to your liver. Will a commercial for the drug (with Secret Formula X-gy added) now be "good" propaganda? Then suppose . . . Well, you can begin to see the problems here.

But they are simple ones compared to those raised by a television commercial which tells us to vote for a political candidate. How would we know *before* the candidate is elected if it is in everybody's self-interest to vote for him? Indeed, how would we know a year after his election if it *has been* in everybody's self-interest? People continually disagree over such matters, and we would be left with a definition of propaganda that says: What I think has been good for me is "rational." What you think has been good for you is "nonrational." But Huxley does give us a hint, although a misleading one, of how we may resolve the problem. He says that nonrational propaganda "appeals to passion." He says nothing about the type of appeal made by rational propaganda, but we may assume he believes it appeals to the "intellect." Here Huxley has, of course, moved to another ground, and is offering a definition based on the type of appeal, not the goodness or badness of the cause. But as he has it here, this shift only results in more confusion. What do we say of "propaganda" that appeals to our passions but in an enlightened cause? And what of propaganda that appeals to our intellect but for a cause that is not consonant with everybody's enlightened self-interest?

There are two possible ways out of this dilemma, as far as I can see. The first is to stop using the word "propaganda" altogether. Huxley himself seems to suggest this in another part of the book, from which I earlier quoted. He says:

In regard to propaganda the early advocates of universal literacy and a free press envisaged only two possibilities: the propaganda might be true, or it might be false. They did not foresee what in fact has happened . . . the development of a vast mass communications industry, concerned in the main neither with the true nor the false, but with the unreal, the more or less totally irrelevant.

I infer from this passage that Huxley does not quite know how to classify "totally irrelevant" messages except to say that they are nonrational because they distract people from seeing the "truth." Of course, they also distract people from seeing "falsehoods," and perhaps on that account, Huxley might think, as I do, that the word "propaganda" causes more misunderstanding than it resolves.

But if the word is to remain with us, then I suggest we pick up on one of Huxley's ideas and use "propaganda" to refer not to the

goodness or badness of causes but exclusively to a use of language designed to evoke a particular kind of response. We might say, for example, that propaganda is language that invites us to respond emotionally, emphatically, more or less immediately, and in an either-or manner. It is distinct from language which stimulates curiosity, reveals its assumptions, causes us to ask questions, invites us to seek further information and to search for error. From this perspective, we eliminate the need to distinguish between good and bad propaganda (except in the sense that “good” propaganda works and “bad” doesn’t). We eliminate the need to focus on causes and actions and the precarious issue of which ones are in whose enlightened self-interest. And we eliminate the need, which thankfully Huxley does not bring up but which others have, to distinguish between language that persuades and language that doesn’t. Since all language is purposive (even, I am told, the language of paranoid schizophrenics), we can assume that talking is always intended as some form of persuasion. Thus, the distinction between persuasion and other types of talking does not seem to be very useful. But the distinction between language that says “Believe this” and language that says “Consider this” is, in my opinion, certainly worth making, and especially because the techniques of saying “Believe this” are so various and sophisticated. Here, for example, are two pieces of propaganda, according to the way in which I have defined the word. The first is of a fairly obvious species, and I think three short paragraphs of it will be about all you can take. It was published in *The Indianapolis Star* in 1968, about the time the Vietnam War was heating up, and was called “A Letter From a War Veteran”:

It was too bad I had to die in another country. The United States is so wonderful, but at least I died for a reason, and a good one.

I may not understand this war, or like it, or want to fight it, but nevertheless I had to do it, and I did.

I died for the people of the United States. I died really for you; you are my one real happiness. I died also for your mom and dad so that they could go on working. . . . For your brothers so that they could play sports in freedom without Communist rule. . . .

It goes on like this for several paragraphs, in the course of which God comes into the picture, along with Dad’s retirement, vacations, and several other sure-fire winners. There is, in my opinion, not much to say of interest about this piece of propaganda because it is so obviously constructed to evoke Indianapolis passions in favor of the war. This is not to say that there were no arguments for waging the war, only that no arguments were presented here in any form, and there is no pretense that there are. The rhetorical devices are, so to speak, all up front, and I confess to a certain admiration for the boldness of their sentimentality. Even the admen on Madison Avenue would be

ashamed to try to pull this off, and I can't help thinking that there must be something very curious going on in Indiana if this could be done as late as 1968.

But the next species of propaganda is another matter. In fact, perhaps in a special way, it illuminates the difference between Indiana stupid talk and New York stupid talk. This one was widely circulated among intellectuals in New York City when it was the fashion to elevate revolutionaries to sainthood.

The propaganda was intended to give us some background information on George Jackson, who was for a time a charismatic leader in the movement for black liberation. We are informed that Jackson was a choirboy, that his father was a post office employee, and that Jackson subscribed to conventional values when he was young. We are also told that the circumstances of Jackson's first serious crime were these: One night a friend whom Jackson had invited for a ride in his car ordered him to stop at a gas station. The friend went inside and stole seventy dollars; then he told Jackson to drive away. Although Jackson was convicted for robbery, we are led to believe that he was entirely innocent. The following paragraph telling of Jackson's early life was included in the piece as part of our background information:

When Jackson was 15, still too young to drive legally, he had a slight accident in his father's car, knocking a few bricks out of the outside wall of a small grocery store near his home. His father paid the damages, the store owner refrained from pressing charges, but he was still sent to reform school for driving without a license. Three years later, shortly after his release from reform school, he made a down payment on a motorbike, which turned out to have been stolen. His mother had the receipt and produced it for the police, but Jackson was sent back to reform school, this time for theft.

I believe that this paragraph is one of the great propagandistic passages of all time, and is deserving of being included in the *Joseph Goebbels Casebook of Famous Boondoggles*. Let us do a small explication of it:

When Jackson was 15, still too young to drive legally. . . .

Well, now, what does this imply? That Jackson was a competent driver, but that the laws governing these matters are unreasonable? Why not, "still too young to drive"? Who or what is in need of correction here, Jackson or the Motor Vehicle Bureau?

. . . he had a slight accident in his father's car, knocking a few bricks out of the outside wall of a small grocery store near his home . . .

The diminutives are almost oppressive: a *slight* accident, a *few* bricks, a *small* grocery store. One almost expects to read that someone's *trivial* leg was *barely* fractured. And what is a slight accident,

anyway? Dislodging even a few bricks from an *outside* wall (It wasn't, for God's sake, an *inside* wall!) doesn't sound awfully slight to me. And why are we told it was "near his home"? Are we being led to believe that he had only driven around the block?

Best of all is the phrase "in his father's car." Does this imply that George really had nothing to do with the accident, that it happened *to* him while he was innocently sitting in his father's car? Why not, "He had a slight accident when he stole his father's car"? Or did George's father approve of his taking the car?

His father paid the damages. The store owner refrained from pressing charges, but he was still sent to reform school for driving without a license.

The "still" is a wonderful piece of propaganda here. It leads us to believe that everything had been settled to everyone's satisfaction, but that the police and the courts were simply being vindictive. After all, it was a *small* crime, and George *was* a choirboy. Why the big deal?

Three years later, shortly after his release from reform school, he made a down payment on a motorbike, which turned out to have been stolen.

First of all, I'd like to know how "shortly" after his release. It sounds as if George was in reform school for almost three years. Is this true? And why is the information being kept from me?

Second, the word "down payment" is simply marvelous. It conjures an image of a responsible businessman engaged in a wholly legitimate transaction. But George obviously didn't buy the motorbike at Macy's. He must have bought it from someone on the streets who was giving him a "real bargain." But, the "turned out to be stolen" suggests that choirboy George never suspected, not even for a moment, that anyone could traffic in stolen property. Where did George grow up, in Beverly Hills?

His mother had the receipt and produced it for the police, but Jackson was sent back to reform school, this time for theft.

The implication here is that the evidence George's mother produced should have been enough for any reasonable policeman. But apparently it wasn't. What was the evidence against George? Was he convicted of theft without a trial? What did the police have to say at the trial? We are told nothing, left with the impression that George was possibly framed and certainly the victim of a system that was out to get him.

Let me stress, in case you have gotten the wrong impression, that I do not know much about the late George Jackson, and some of what I do know evokes my admiration. What I am talking about is a method

of propagandizing which attempts to conceal itself as information. The response that is asked for here is, "Believe this. You are being given all the information you need to know." But I can sooner believe that a soldier would go to war for Mom's apple pie than that a friend of George invited him for a ride, "ordered" him to stop at a gas station, held up the place, and told him to drive away, while all the time George thought his friend was only going to the bathroom. I would guess that you couldn't get away with that kind of stuff in Indianapolis. . . . In New York, it's easy.

Each end of the political spectrum has, I suppose, its own favorite style of propaganda. The Right tends to prefer gross, straightforward sentimentality. The Left, a sort of surface intellectualizing. But it is very important, it seems to me, to note that the response required of us, in each instance, is a passionate, uncritical acceptance of a point of view.

I am not implying, by the way, that there is no legitimate function for propaganda. There are several semantic environments—advertising, for example—where it is quite reasonable for one person to ask another to believe what he is saying. In fact, much of our literature—especially, popular literature—amounts to a direct appeal to our emotions. To the extent that such appeals are cathartic or entertaining or, in some sense, a stimulus to self-discovery, they are invaluable. In other words, propaganda is not, by itself, a problem, if it comes dressed in its natural clothing. But when it presents itself as something else, regardless of the cause it represents, it is a form of stupid talk that can be, and has been, extremely dangerous. It is dangerous for two reasons. First, propaganda demands a way of responding which can become habitual. If we allow ourselves, too easily, to summon the emotions that our own causes require, we may be unable to hold them back when confronted with someone else's causes. And second, propaganda has a tendency to work best on groups rather than individuals. It has the effect of turning groups into crowds, which is what Huxley calls "herd poisoning." As he describes it, herd poisoning is "an active, extraverted drug. The crowd-intoxicated individual escapes from responsibility, intelligence, and morality into a kind of frantic, animal mindlessness."

Here, Huxley is talking about what happens when an individual has joined with other individuals in a semantic environment where propaganda, unchecked, is doing its work. Stupid talk is transformed into an orgy of crazy talk, the consequences of which can be found in graves stretching from Siberia to Mississippi to Weimar to Peking. (This last sentence is, of course, propaganda, pure and simple, but I like it, anyway.)