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COM416: Propaganda

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LEAP 3: Propaganda Inquiry - A Synthesis

Throughout the run of COM416, Propaganda, we have covered the topic of propaganda from what it is, to where it can be found, and how to decipher it - with everything in between (such as conspiracy theories and activism propaganda). Not only was this class taught in a way that enhanced my knowledge and understanding of propaganda, but it also broke down the complexities of propaganda and so much about it that I did not know before taking this class. While I could write a lengthy paper about the numerous insights on propaganda that were meaningful to me, the following pages detail the five insights that were *most* meaningful, examples of these insights both from class and the internet, and so on. Overall, COM416 was a jam-packed and comprehensive semester-long lesson about propaganda and everything that contributes to it and that it affects.

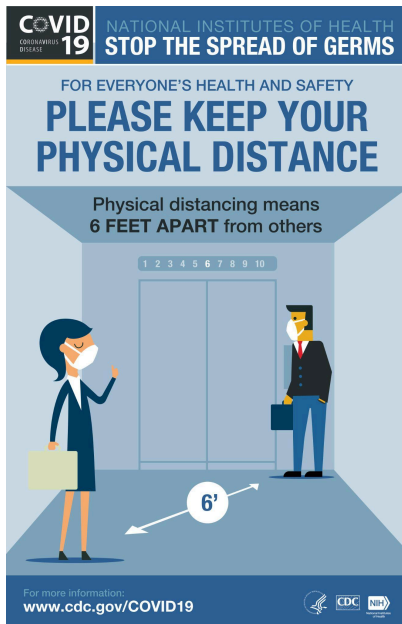
There is a formula behind propaganda - no matter what the message is. This formula is the first insight on propaganda that I found meaningful, because it helped me understand what propaganda is, and how and why it is used. Considering the extensive history of propaganda, and how effective it has been in the thousands of ways it has been used, good or bad, it is no surprise that for propaganda to be as powerful as possible, it follows a formula. The term “propaganda” itself mean, “[the] dissemination of information - facts, arguments, rumors, half-truths, or lies” (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 2023), and has two main purposes: to intensify, or to downplay

[an issue, topic, etc.]. The goal of intensifying is to promote a solution to a problem, whereas when downplaying, the goal is to divert attention away from the problem. Even if the goals of different forms of propaganda are far different from each other, all forms of propaganda operate to either intensify or to downplay (Hobbs, 2020). In order for propaganda to successfully intensify a topic, it must make something look good. By using tools such as repetition, association, and composition, the significance and importance of an idea is intensified to its audience. Repetition is effective because when words, phrases, or images are seen or heard repeatedly, audiences are more likely to believe what they are seeing or hearing. Association is a popular technique used to intensify an idea because propagandists can use their media to persuade the audience by associating their idea with something positive or negative, with hopes to elicit a response in the audience. Composition is equally as important as the two prior tools because even if something is repetitive and contains associations, if it is not composed properly, with creative design, variations in words and sentences, and visual attractiveness to the audience, it will not catch individuals' attention, and therefore will be useless (Hobbs, 2020). On the other hand, when an idea is being downplayed, the goal is for it to look small, bad, or unimportant. This can be done by using diversion, omission, and confusion. When a propagandist uses diversion, they are providing their audience with something better, or more exciting, to focus on rather than the issue at hand. Oppositely, omission does nothing to cause any attention at all - everything is just ignored. Another tool that propagandists will use is confusion, with their goal being to provide too much or too little information about an issue, with the goal being to overwhelm and distract the audience (Hobbs, 2020). These two opposing goals of either intensifying or downplaying a topic/idea are what make propaganda so powerful. Effective propaganda conveys messages, themes, and language that appeal directly to the target

audience(s), and many times, to even more specific and distinct groups within a larger population. When messages are personally relevant to their audience, individuals are more likely to pay attention to the message and its information and ideas because it aligns with what they already believe. Successful propaganda tells simple stories that are familiar and trusted, often using metaphors in efforts to appeal directly to the target audience. Often, even if a message is untrue, if it is told in a way that is familiar and recognizable to the audience, it will be believed regardless. In order for propaganda to work effectively in a society, it needs to appeal to the audience's emotional and logical sides, use symbols and language that the audience(s) will know and recognize in an effort to control the message, target specific audiences whose beliefs and values align with those of the propaganda, and utilize the ever-changing technological world and its media. Propaganda can be found virtually everywhere - in advertising, education, entertainment, journalism, public relations, government, politics, activism, advocacy, and so on (Hobbs, 2020).

The second insight on propaganda that was most meaningful to me was learning about how much propaganda is based on fear. As written on the week three posting on PathWright, "propaganda plays on human emotions – fear, hope, anger, frustration, sympathy – to direct audiences toward the desired goal. In the deepest sense, propaganda is a mind game – the skillful propagandist exploits people's fears and prejudices... by activating emotions, the recipient is emotionally moved by the message of the propagandist." Activating strong emotions, which is one of the Four Keys of Propaganda, is like a game of emotional manipulation on a large scale. Propagandists will spread fabricated truths and rumors to create fear in their audience(s), with the end goal being to have said audience act in the desired way, or having the desired thoughts.

The Covid-19 Pandemic that our society experienced over the past few years brought



forward a lot of propaganda that used fear to promote certain ideas. In this infographic, originally produced and distributed by the Center for Disease Control, the statements are fear-provoking. The statement “for everyone’s health and safety, please keep your physical distance. Physical distancing means 6 feet apart from others” (CDC, 2021) introduces the idea that if individuals do not distance themselves from others by at least six feet, they can be responsible for others’ health and safety. The fear caused in individuals is exactly what the

propagandist who designed this graphic wanted to happen. The goal of this advertisement is to intensify the problem (the pandemic and other people’s health and safety) by offering a solution (physical distancing). In terms of what motivates an individual or group to create propaganda depends on the situation in which they are in. Whether it’s globally, nationally, locally, or personally, anyone who feels compelled to share information with others with the hope of persuading their thoughts and/or actions is engaging in creating propaganda. What differs between the propaganda that different groups and individuals choose to make is what emotional appeal is used to reach the end goal - such as fear, hope, anger, frustration, sympathy.

Third, another insight on propaganda that was meaningful and interesting to me is how some propaganda is used for good, and some is used for bad. When I think about the word “propaganda,” I almost always think of WWII propaganda that I learned about in high school that promoted American troops to join the war, or Nazi propaganda that promoted their skewed ideas and inhumane practices. However, there are far more instances in which propaganda has

been used, sometimes for a positive result and other times for a negative one. One way that propaganda can be used for good is in activism and advocacy. Individuals who are members of social groups and movements and who are trying to improve society or create social change often use propaganda to influence public opinion. Activists attempt to promote social, political, economic, or environmental change through forms of propaganda, such as communication activities and public events that attract attention and influence peoples' knowledge, attitudes, and opinions. So, while the way that activists use propaganda might not come to mind when someone thinks about what propaganda is, it is certainly something that is used in activism and advocacy groups to promote their ideals. However, even in propaganda that can be considered "good," the element of fear is still present. For example, an advocacy group voicing for environmental change, which is generally considered a "good" cause, may include statistics about what negative events could take place if the audience did not take their advice, thus creating fear for the environment, etc. These lines between good and bad propaganda become blurry, sometimes, because of the complicated relationship between propaganda itself and persuasion. They are similar constructs, are very closely related, and have been debated and discussed for hundreds of years. Both propaganda and persuasion refer to efforts that use communication and symbolic expression to influence people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. However, they are still different. The term "propaganda" refers to a *type* of persuasion that aims to influence the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of a large audience, not just a single individual or small group like during instances of persuasion. There was a time that the line separating these two constructs was more clear, but today, there is a blurriness between both terms. The blurriness between propaganda and persuasion can make it difficult to differentiate between what propaganda is good and what propaganda is bad, but it is overall most important to be aware of the goals and

effects of propaganda so that we, as individuals and as part of larger groups, understand the media we are consuming and what its true intentions are (Hobbs, 2020).

To come back around to what I said at the beginning of the previous paragraph, propaganda was always something that, before taking this class, I thought happened during WWII and wasn't really seen or used anymore in these modern times. However, I quickly learned that I was incorrect. Learning about current forms of propaganda was a huge insight that I found meaningful and important. With the rise of social media and its ever-increasing prevalence and usage, propaganda is everywhere. Propaganda is some of the ads we get on TikTok and YouTube, the infographics we read and/or click through on Instagram, is woven into news stories on the TV and in newspapers, ... it is truly everywhere. The methods of modern propaganda that we learned about in class that are present in elections, conspiracy theories, art, and so on, proved that propaganda is not something of the past and is in fact, still widely used today. My perspective on propaganda has definitely changed throughout this class. Originally, after I realized that it was not only part of WWII, I thought that propaganda could only be used in other political ways. However, I was incorrect once again when I began understanding just how common propaganda was. But, I used this confusion to my understanding to lean into the units about conspiracy theories, art and activism, and entertainment with hopes of gaining information about propaganda today - which did happen. I now know what modern propaganda looks like and how to spot if something I am seeing or hearing is true, or if it is a form of propaganda that could very well be untrue. When reflecting on my life before taking this class, I realize that I would have benefited from learning about what propaganda truly is and how to navigate it. It would have been helpful to learn about propaganda earlier in school, since I now see that I am confronted with it in many areas of life.

Like we learned during Week 12, some forms of education, from kindergarten through college, are explicitly designed to lead students to accept a particular worldview. Education can be a form of indoctrination when certain doctrines, ideas, information, values, and beliefs are not permitted to be questioned. Propaganda enters the classroom in many ways, some of which can be considered forms of indoctrination. Many businesses and technology companies provide curriculum material to educators, without allowing room for anything else to be taught outside of said curriculum. These curriculums are specifically designed to promote a particular point of view, which can be considered a form of propaganda when you reconsider the definition of what propaganda really is (“[the] dissemination of information - facts, arguments, rumors, half-truths, or lies” (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 2023).). For example, in the video posted on the Education vs. Indoctrination: Stop K-12 Indoctrination path, the concerned parent is speaking about the language used in a teacher’s curriculum book designed for first grade students. The parent is concerned that the curriculum is promoting language, behavior, and actions that go against what a first grader should really be learning. The parent feels even more strong about the wording on the second page, when the curriculum is talking about emotional words. The book says, “tell students when they write a call to action, they should include emotional words to get readers to feel strongly about the problem...” (YouTube, 2013). This concerned parent is worried that through this curriculum, students will be taught how to be manipulative and use certain words and behaviors to get what they want. This can be considered a form of indoctrination because the text is guiding the teacher to teach in this fashion, without any real rhyme or reason and without thinking critically about what they are actually teaching. It is important for teachers today to be aware of propaganda and indoctrination - they do not want their curriculum to be the subject of a video of this nature!

There were countless insights on propaganda that were meaningful and important to me, but these top five are what really stood out the most. Learning about these insights, seeing examples of them, and being able to recognize them in my own life made this session of COM416 entertaining and worthwhile.

References

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