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COM416: Propaganda

Professor Tuzel

Leap 3: Propaganda Inquiry

The semester-long journey through COM416 has provided me with an in-depth education in the world that is propaganda. Looking back on time with this course, there were 5 topics that stood out to me, each of them interlinking with each other and contributing to the understanding of propaganda as a whole, these topics were Persuasive Techniques, Media Manipulation, Critical Thinking, Tailoring to Audiences, and the Evolution of Propaganda. In this piece, each of these topics will be described, reviewing the insights that make these parts of propaganda unique and explaining how they come together to be what they are, and how they impact society.

Propaganda's main aspect is that of persuasive techniques, this is the most powerful tool, any propagandist should be using. This technique is powerful because of its ability to tap into human emotion, when propagandists think about what message they want to send to their audience, they have to think about the emotional appeal aspect, propagandists must be extremely thorough in their understanding of psychology because depending on how they can entice their audience they will get a specific response. Propaganda can call on a person's emotions and influence their opinions, it can ignite fear, create anger, and even fill a person with great passion if need be (Cuncic, 2023). What a person feels or thinks can easily be manipulated by propaganda, emotions are the gateway by which these messages can reach the audience.

The media plays the biggest role in how this propaganda is spread about. In 2023, The biggest form of communication is the internet, and that plays a pivotal role in shaping the opinions of the public. From newsrooms to social media platforms, the way information is delivered and spreads is vastly different from how it was spread, going back every decade, the way information was received in 2013 is not the same as it was in 2003, and so forth. From a visual aspect to an auditory aspect propaganda has changed immensely, in fact, these days some people prefer to get their information from a talking fish on TikTok, instead of a professional journalist (bikinibottombuzz, 2023). From print, radio, television, and so on, the adaptability of propaganda across various platforms is present.

Another key aspect is how language is manipulated. The persuasive technique starts with emotional appeal, then thinking about the mode of transportation, as in how can the message be spread to the audience. The words in the message must be carefully chosen, because propaganda influences how information is perceived, this form of manipulation is beyond what can be seen or heard but is subtle, it enters the subconscious, in order to make what began as an opinion into fact (Kwintessential).

Picture the ABC hit show *How to Get Away with Murder*; the characters on this show spend time staging crime scenes for a lot of the crimes they commit and using language and the media to manipulate the story they are telling. In one episode the main character Annalise helps cover the murder of her husband, and plays the martyr for a while, although she didn't outright kill him, public opinion was swayed so that she looked like the poor widowed wife (Yohannes 2022). The information that is available to the public is the main point here, in the world of *How to Get Away with Murder*, the audience doesn't know what she did to her husband, but the media was manipulated in a way that sheds positive on her, meticulously

selected and framed in a way that was good rather than bad and worked out in her favor. In the real world, media manipulation works like this too, information is carefully selected, and the facts are pulled apart and shaped in order to fit a narrative that will sway public opinion.

All of these instruments and tools come together to form a piece, that is propaganda, and this piece must be presented to the audience. Presentation is an important part of the propaganda journey and also is something that the propagandist can still control. There is a power dynamic that occurs between the piece of propaganda and public opinion. The headlines, tone of voice, the words being used, and the image being presented all work together, in order to execute the message in the way that was intended.

After all of this is done and the propaganda has been released to the public, all that remains is the interpretation of the audience. Critical thinking is a strong contender against propaganda. Why? Because instead of taking the message at face value and accepting it at face value, the person or persons is on the receiving end are thinking about the subtle entities the propagandist threw their way and what the meaning behind the message was. They have the ability to think about whether or not this opinion is in fact true or false, fact or fiction. Critical thinking creates the ability to question and evaluate the information being presented and allows for the audience to make their own decisions on a topic.

This is also a form of propaganda, there are two ways to present this example; the first being the effects of nazi propaganda. When Nazi propaganda was thriving this information was taken at face value by a lot of Germans, Patriotism was running at high levels for many, and in turn, this made the message of Hitler prevalent and strong. On the opposite side, this wasn't the case, and many people fought against these ideals. Using independent media and journalism, analyzing and counteracting propaganda techniques used by the Nazi regimen,

and much more were all critical thinking tools used to stop the heinous message of Nazi propaganda.

One of the main challenges with critical thinking in propaganda though, is that the message is supposed to be taken at face value. To break through the web of manipulation defeats the purpose of propaganda, which is to deliver a message to an audience that will accept what is being said. Whether the propaganda is being used for or against a cause, it is still being used to sway public opinion. For example in the 2021 presidential election, democrats created a video of phrases said by former president Donald Trump, the visuals in the video showed America approximately 70 years ago, the scene displayed was African Americans of that time being abused by White Americans. The point of this video was to make the public think about the phrase “Make America Great Again” because one of the messages that Trump presents is that America was better in the olden days. The point of this ad was to make the audience think about what was so great about the times of inequality and violence in America, the point of this form of propaganda is, to think critically about whether or not the message that Trump spreads is right or wrong, but also appeal to the emotions of the viewer and make them feel bad about the scene they are being resented. At the same time, the point of this ad was to make the audience recognize that Trump's message is bad, they want you to not only think critically but also take the message at face value, because of the emotions and negative undertone of the video.

Critical thinking requires that the audience looks beyond the message, by looking at the undertones of propaganda being presented and come to a concise decision, of whether or not this piece of propaganda is true or false, no matter if they are for or against that message.

Being able to use this skill, though, is not negative but allows the audience to appreciate the time and effort it takes to create a well-thought-out piece of propaganda.

Further, it is important to understand how propaganda is tailored to the public. Often, propaganda is made to be for a certain audience, in order for propaganda to be successful it must be this way because that audience is the one who will most likely accept the message at face value better than the audience it was not made for. The previous example of critical serves as a good example here too, the message brought forth by the democratic party only works best if directed at the people in that part or people who are more open-minded, the republican party serves as the opposing side in this case are quicker to argue against that message, because it isn't tailored to their needs and opinions. In order to deliver a successful piece of propaganda, there are a few things to think about regarding the audience, such as the demographic, what they might be vulnerable to, and their beliefs and values. Researching these methods is a crucial part of delivering a message efficiently, it ensures that the audience really resonates with what is being said.

Of course, just because the topic of the message is one the audience can relate to, it's important to be very careful. Remembering that propaganda is used to manipulate the audience's opinion it's important to be completely ethical overall. It's important to consider the responsibility propagandists have to appropriately deliver a message and the potential consequences that could arise because of this. This is not to say that there is a strict set of rules to follow when building propaganda, history has shown that when propagandists set out to deliver the message they want it doesn't matter what the consequences are. This topic is bigger than just the impact ethics in propaganda can have on an audience or group of people, but when ignored can affect society and the world, as seen in World Wars. In World War II,

for example, propaganda was used to dehumanize and villainize the enemy on either side. Causing countries to act in inappropriate ways, for example, Germany against Jews and later America against Asians in the United States. Propaganda during these times portrayed the opposing side in a negative light. Today it's important to consider what the ethical implications would be before creating propaganda, if ignored or challenged, what would the consequences be? Or how much can a propagandist get away with before someone gets hurt or society is affected?

The thought and hard work that goes into creating propaganda is so intricate and vastly unique, that many times it goes beyond that of an individual person and audience. It reflects on society and current events. More important is a telling of how that society will react or be affected by propaganda, and how it can be used to shape the world around us.

History is a huge part of all societies in the world, it's important to study the impact that propaganda has had on society, through changing societal norms, cultures, politics, laws, etc..., as propaganda has evolved it has only become a more intricate, powerful tool. By looking at ancient civilizations, it's easy to see how far propaganda has come. For example in ancient Egypt, Pharaoh Ramses II, commissioned the construction of temples known as the Ramesseum and Abu Simbel Temples, to show his achievements, they also served as a portrayal of his greatness and power, of course from his point of view. These monuments trace history but also are a record of propaganda, the monuments of Rames are his way of telling his people of greatness, they serve as a reminder of his power, and portray him in a positive light.

As time has gone on, society has moved on from monuments, and print was the most popular form of propaganda, this came in various forms, such as posters, newspapers,

pamphlets, cartoons, etc..., specifically during the early era of the United States as a country, all of these were popular. For example, in the American Revolution, Cartoons and pamphlets were very popular, such as “Common Sense: addressed to the Inhabitants of America...” Written by an Englishman, these pamphlets were used to ignite patriotism during this time and shed light on the dealings between America and Britain (Donway, 2023).

Later, Radio and film became more popular, and it was easier to hear the passion coming from a presenter's voice. At this point, propaganda became more sophisticated and intelligent by design and it was easier to deliver the message to the audience and be able to connect in that way.

The introduction of the digital age has been an even greater shift in propaganda evolution, as the internet, social media, and the way people consume information have changed. These platforms are powerful tools where people are able to share information, but also they are able to bounce ideas and opinions off of each other. The internet and social platforms have also become more accessible, as more people are able to read nowadays compared to the past, propaganda is able to reach people that would otherwise never have been reached before, the age of digital media. Propaganda can better reach more people but at the same, people are able to break down propaganda together. For this reason, it can be harder for propaganda to stick to its intended audience because, in this age, propaganda cannot be isolated to just one audience.

Propaganda shows a comprehensive and evolving history that can be traced very far. It's easy to see how society has adapted and dealt with these changes, and how the evolution of propaganda has affected societies throughout time. Understanding this, only broadens what one can do with propaganda.

To end, COM416 has taught me so much about the world, about history, which is my favorite subject, and about propaganda that I didn't even know was propaganda, to begin with, this course has turned me into a critical thinker. Understanding persuasive techniques, media manipulation, critical thinking, historical context, and how information is tailored to the audience has changed how I see the information that is fed to me every day. Propaganda is a powerful tool, that can make or break a message and change the world.

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