

Propagnada

and How to Recognize It

by Ronald B. Standler

Rhetoric is the art of persuading someone. Unless you live as a hermit, totally isolated from people, rhetoric is a vital skill. Propaganda is a subset of rhetoric, in which the speaker/writer attempts to manipulate the audience with emotion or fallacious reasoning.

A common theme of propaganda is the us versus them posturing, in which the speaker/writer encourages you to join with reasonable people and oppose the enemy. The us versus them posturing is particularly damaging to society, in that it is inherently divisive and erects barriers to working together to solve problems that affect everyone.

Propaganda is commonly found in speeches and writings of politicians and lawyers, as well as in advertising. In other words, propaganda is commonly used by experts in convincing people. Because of propaganda's appeal to emotion, use of fallacious reasoning, and appeal to membership in groups, propaganda appeals to an audience that is either irrational or unthinking.

Name-Calling

Name calling is such an ancient propaganda technique that it is frequently identified by its Latin name, *ad hominem* attack. For example, a politician who supports law-and-order could criticize his opponent as a “card-carrying ACLU member”.

A politician who disagrees with a judge can label him/her as “a liberal activist judge”. The epithet can be emphasized by frequent, repeated use. For example, using the phrase “liberal activist judge” every time one refers to a judge will have some members of the audience wanting to lynch the judge by the end of the speech.

One particularly vicious example of name calling is to compare one’s opponent to Nazis. Such a comparison should never be used without specific reasons to support such a comparison. And even with specific reasons, such a comparison may be too inflammatory for rational discussion.

Another way to denigrate someone is to call them “unprofessional”. A politician sometimes denounces “special-interest groups”, which really means those interests are not the speaker’s interests. This criticism of “special interest groups” is often more than name calling, the speaker seems offended that these “special interests” are allowed to participate in the political process.

Because of the strong negative connotation of the word “propaganda”, that word can be used in name calling: we give you information, they give you propaganda. Sarcasm and ridicule often accompany name calling.

Glittering Generality

In name calling, one pastes a pejorative label on the enemy. In glittering generalities, one pastes a virtuous label on the desired product. There are many examples of words that are used as glittering generalities, such as mentions of: civilization, Christian, courage, democracy, dignity, duty, fairness, freedom, glory, good, heroes, honesty, honor, justice, liberty, love, loyal, patriot, peace, scientific etc. Each of these words has legitimate uses, but sprinkling them in text for emotional effect is propaganda. The legitimate use of these words is often to express a conclusion that is supported with reasons, while in propaganda these words express a mere assertion.

The use of glittering generalities in propaganda is intentionally vague, so that the audience provides its own interpretation of these virtuous words. A good example of glittering generality is to call something “scientific”.

For example, the study of government operations was formerly in a government department or civics class, but is now known as “political science”. There is nothing scientific about politics. Calling something a science does not make it scientific.

The food labels “all natural” or “100% organic” are examples of glittering generalities. The inference is that something that is produced in a chemical factory is more pure than some product of nature.

Transfer

Another effective propaganda technique is to transfer the prestige, authority, or virtue of some group to the product that is being promoted. The common way to do the transfer is to prominently display a symbol, such as a U.S. flag or to have an organization make an endorsement.

By displaying a giant image of the U.S. flag, or hundreds of regular sized U.S. flags, an organization projects its image as that of genuine patriotic Americans. And it's not just the Americans who do this - watching old movies shows that the Nazis routinely displayed large banners and flags too.

An effective propaganda technique is to include one or more victims at some public meeting and essentially invite or dare one's opponents to deny the entitlement of these victims a cure for their illness, or to deny the entitlement of these victims to justice etc.

Natural sympathy for the suffering of the victim is transferred to a political issue. The presence of the victims is vividly emotional and precludes a rational discussion of a possible remedy for the problem.

One can use transfers in the other direction too. Guilt-by-association is the name for propaganda in which a person's reputation is destroyed by associating him with a bad group, such as the Ku Klux Klan or the Nazis etc.

One needs to be careful when advocates of some political position attempt to hijack a professional society, and have the professional society endorse a political position that is irrelevant to the society's expertise.

Testimonial

In both politics and advertising, one frequently sees a famous person - a movie star or a politician endorse a candidate or product. This propaganda technique is to take someone who the audience "knows" and likes, and attempt to transfer the famous person's opinion to the audience.

In the technique of transfer, the favorable image of a group is transferred to a product, while in the technique of testimonial, the favorable image of an individual person is transferred to a product. An alternative testimonial is to take a highly educated person and have that person endorse some candidate or product.

Sometimes a testimonial includes frequent use of technical words and equations that the audience is not intended to understand, but are used to impress the audience with the alleged erudition of the highly educated person.

The key to diagnosing propaganda is to recognize that, without understanding the reasons for a conclusion, the conclusion is just propaganda. One could use the propaganda technique of name calling to condemn these so called professionals who are a stooge in such testimonials, because, like a whore, they sold their academic degree and professional credentials.

Giving higher credibility to published, peer-reviewed papers is akin to honoring the propaganda technique of transferring the prestige and authority of the publisher to the paper itself. Authors who are personally familiar with the peer-review process know that such publication is not an endorsement of either the truth of the publication or the value of the publication.

In law, it is common to use long quotations from appellate court opinions, particularly opinions of the U.S. Supreme Court, to convince the reader. This is not propaganda. Law is made by judges, so quotations from those judges are the most authoritative way of stating the law, as well as stating the reasons for the law.

Plain Folks

Politicians attempt to present themselves as just ordinary citizens. Look at the first sentence of a political speech, in which the politician acknowledges the presence of dignitaries by rank or name, and then says "... and my fellow citizens", because the politician wants us to think that the politician is one of us. It is the same for leaders of Labour Unions and professional societies, who attempt to present themselves as just ordinary members of the group.

Card Stacking

Card stacking refers to the selective presentation of only facts that are favorable to the desired conclusion, and the deliberate omission of facts that are unfavorable. The legal term for card stacking is fraud.

Bandwagon

The basic theme of the bandwagon is everyone else is buying the product, so you should too. Most people prefer to be in the majority. There are at least two reasons why being in the majority is better: 1. The majority is the winner in elections, and the winner has political power, and 2. most people like to be conformists, rather than vulnerable to criticism for being different.

An advertisement that suggests a particular product is widely used motivates nonusers to try that product, in order to be like other people. A variation on the bandwagon propaganda technique is to suggest that the product will be the next big thing, and that by purchasing it now, one can be recognized as an early adopter who is ahead of the crowd.

This is an intriguing twist on the conventional bandwagon, in that the audience is invited to be a minority who is ahead of the majority. Mentions of “fringe groups” or “out of the mainstream” are propaganda that denigrates positions held by a minority of people. This propaganda invite the audience to stay with the majority on the bandwagon, instead of deserting the majority.

Insisting on a Binary Choice

Another common propaganda technique is for the speaker/writer to insist that the audience make one of two choices: to join with us, or to join with the enemy:

“You are either with us or against us”

“You are part of the solution or part of the problem”

“You either oppose terrorism, or you support terrorism”

Such a demand creates polarization, by dividing everyone into two camps, us versus them.

Such a demand not only oversimplifies a complex issue and ignores a spectrum of possible choices, but also rudely insists that the audience choose now between one good choice and one bad choice.

With some careful thought, one might find a better choice than what is offered by the speaker/writer.

And, in some cases, it may be wise to do nothing, because a clumsy “solution” to one problem will make matters worse by creating new problems.

Such a demand is commonly used by religious zealots and political extremists, but once one learns to recognize this propaganda technique, one can find it in speeches and writings of mainstream politicians too.

Pejorative Labels

A quick propaganda attack is accomplished by pasting one or more pejorative labels on someone. Such labels accomplish two functions: 1. they exclude the enemy from us, and 2. they put the enemy on the defensive.

The first function is simply us versus them, seeing people only as members of groups. The second function recognizes that it is cheaper and easier to attack than defend. It might take the enemy several pages of paper to explain why the label is not valid, and the attacker has no intention of letting the audience hear several pages of defense by the enemy.

In short, such labels are not a fair fight, they are propaganda.

“Extremist”

The speaker/writer labels the enemy as an “extremist”. We are moderate and in the majority. The enemy is an extremist, outside the boundary of acceptable behaviour.

The truth is that so-called extremists sometimes push for change in our beliefs that no one else has the courage to challenge. Pasting the “extremist” label on someone invites the listener/reader to automatically ignore or condemn the so-called extremist. But the so-called extremist might have a message worth considering, particularly if the extremist label is only propaganda.

It takes a lot of courage for a creative scientist to publish a finding that some conventional belief is wrong and needs to be changed, but at least the scientist will have objective evidence from calculations or experiments to show that the proposed change better represents the actual behaviour of nature.

In the area of politics or religion, such rational reasons are more difficult to find, which makes it more difficult to change political or religious dogma. The use of the word “radical” in propaganda is similar to the use of the word “extremist”.

Anti-intellectualism

Instead of honoring and respecting someone with superior intellectual accomplishments, conventional American practice seems to be to marginalize professors and other intellectuals. The common phrase “it’s only of academic interest” discards an idea without giving it genuine consideration, because the idea allegedly has no practical significance.

Labelling an “ivory-tower idealist” suggests that person might have ideas, but is naïve about political reality. And, finally, someone with genuinely superior academic credentials can be denigrated by calling him/her arrogant, putting him/her on the defensive for having devoted years of their life to earning those credentials, as if the credentials are shameful or embarrassing.

Similarly, people who have unusual intellectual ability and who make unconventional choices get pejorative labels of “geek” or “nerd” pasted on them. While so-called “normal” people denigrate the geeks or nerds, the normal people expect that a geek or nerd will help them when their computer malfunctions.

To defeat this mode of attack, political candidates with doctoral degrees normally hide their education.

Fear

“The streets of our country are in turmoil. The universities are filled with students rebelling and rioting. Communists are seeking to destroy our country. Russia is threatening us with her might, and the Republic is in danger. Yes - danger from within and without. We need law and order! Without it our nation cannot survive.” - Adolf Hitler, 1932.

When a propagandist warns members of her audience that disaster will ensue if they do not follow a particular course of action, she is using the fear appeal. By playing on the audience's deep-seated fears, practitioners of this technique hope to redirect attention away from the merits of a particular proposal and toward steps that can be taken to reduce the fear.

This technique can be highly effective when wielded by a fascist demagogue, but it is usually used in less dramatic ways. Consider the following:

A television commercial portrays a terrible automobile accident (the fear appeal), and reminds viewers to wear their seat belts (the fear-reducing behavior).

A pamphlet from an insurance company includes pictures of houses destroyed by floods (the fear appeal), and follows up with details about home-owners' insurance (the fear-reducing behavior).

A letter from a pro-gun organization begins by describing lawless America in which only criminals own guns (the fear appeal), and concludes by asking readers to oppose a ban on automatic weapons (the fear-reducing behavior).

Ever since the end of the second world war, social psychologists and communication scholars have been conducting empirical studies in order to learn more about the effectiveness of fear appeals. Some have criticized the conceptualization of the studies, and others have found fault with the experimental methods, but the general conclusions are worth considering:

All other things being equal, the more frightened a person is by a communication, the more likely she is to take positive preventive action.

Fear appeals will not succeed in altering behaviour if the audience feels powerless to change the situation.

Fear appeals are more likely to succeed in changing behavior if they contain specific recommendations for reducing the threat that the audience believes are both effective and doable.

In summary, there are four elements to a successful fear appeal: 1) a threat, 2) a specific recommendation about how the audience should behave, 3) audience perception that the recommendation will be effective in addressing the threat, and 4) audience perception that they are capable of performing the recommended behaviour.

When fear appeals do not include all four elements, they are likely to fail. For example, the anti-nuclear movement successfully aroused public fear of nuclear war, but offered few specific recommendations that people perceived as effective and doable. By contrast, fall-out shelters were enormously popular during the 1950s because people believed that shelters would protect them from nuclear war, and installing a shelter was something that they could do.

In a similar fashion, during the 1964 election campaign in America, Lyndon Johnson was said to have swayed many voters with a well-known television commercial that portrayed a young girl being annihilated by a nuclear blast. This commercial linked nuclear war to Barry Goldwater (Johnson's opponent), and proposed a vote for Johnson as an effective, doable way of avoiding the threat. In contemporary politics, the fear-appeal continues to be widespread. When a politician agitates the public's fear of immigration, or crime, and proposes that voting for her will reduce the threat, she is using this technique. When confronted with persuasive messages that capitalize on our fear, we should ask ourselves the following questions:

Is the speaker exaggerating the fear or threat in order to obtain my support?

How legitimate is the fear that the speaker is provoking?

Will performing the recommended action actually reduce the supposed threat?

When viewed dispassionately, what are the merits of the speaker's proposal?

Logical Fallacies

Logic is the process of drawing a conclusion from one or more premises. A statement of fact, but itself, is neither logical or illogical, it can be true or false.

As an example of how logic can be abused, consider the following argument:

Premise 1: Bill Clinton supports gun-control legislation.

Premise 2: All fascist regimes of the twentieth century have passed gun-control legislation.

Conclusion: Bill Clinton is a fascist.

One way of testing the logic of an argument like this is to translate the basic terms and see if the conclusion still makes sense. As you can see, the premises may be correct, but the conclusion does not necessarily follow. Example:

Premise 1: All Catholics believe in God.

Premise 2: All Muslims believe in God.

Conclusion: All Catholics are Muslims.

This is a rather extreme example of how logic can be abused. It should be noted that a message can be illogical without being propagandistic - we all make logical mistakes. The difference is that propagandists deliberately manipulate logic in order to promote their cause.

To dislodge the bad logic, ask the following question:

Premise 1: if 1 is a number

Premise 2: and if 2 is also a number

Conclusion: Does 1 equal 2? The answer is NO, because 2 is greater than 1.

Unwarranted Extrapolation

The tendency to make huge predictions about the future on the basis of a few small facts is a common logical fallacy. It is easy to see the persuasiveness in this type of argument. By pushing one's case to the limit, one forces the opposition into a weaker position. The whole future is lined up against him. Drive to the defensive, he finds it hard to disprove something which has not yet happened.

Extrapolation is what scientists call such predictions, with the warning that they must be used with caution. A homely illustration is the driver who found three gas stations per mile along a stretch of road, and concluded that there must be plenty of gas all the way to the north pole. You chart two or three points, draw a curve through them, and extend it indefinitely.

This logical sleight of hand often provides the basis for an effective fear-appeal. Consider the following contemporary examples:

If Congress passes legislation limiting the availability of automatic weapons, America will slide down a slippery slope which will ultimately result in the banning of all guns, the destruction of the Constitution, and a totalitarian police state.

If the United States approves NAFTA, the giant sucking sound that we hear will be the sound of thousands of jobs and factories disappearing to Mexico.

The introduction of communication tools such as the Internet will lead to a radical decentralization of government, greater political participation, and a rebirth of community.

When a communicator attempts to convince you that a particular action will lead to disaster or to utopia, it may be helpful to ask the following questions:

Is there enough data to support the speaker's predictions about the future?

Can I think of other ways that things might turn out?

If there are many different ways things could turn out, why is the speaker painting such an extreme picture?