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What is Propaganda?

Neil Postman once wrote that of all the words we use to talk about talk, the word “propaganda” is the most mischievous. That’s because the word has a wide variety of definitions:

1. Propaganda is a form of communication aimed towards influencing the attitude of a population toward some cause or position.

-Wikipedia

2. Propaganda is a form of information that panders to our insecurities and anxieties.

-Jacques Ellul

3. Propaganda is indifferent to truth and truthfulness, knowledge and understanding; it is a form of strategic communication that uses any means to accomplish its ends.

-Walter Cunningham

4. Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.

-Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell

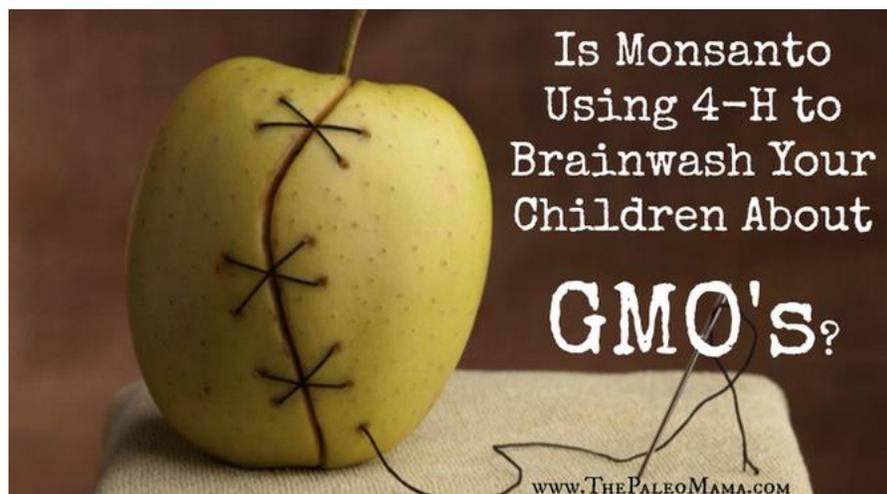
5. Propaganda is a form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for [ideological](#), political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels.

-Richard Alan Nelson

6. Propaganda is intentionally-designed communication that invites us to respond emotionally, immediately, and in an either-or manner.

-Neil Postman

However it is defined, one thing is clear: contemporary propaganda is everywhere - in news, information, advertising and entertainment. In a Web 2.0 world, propaganda is impossible to avoid.



Where to Find Propaganda

Instructions: After reading each section, provide a specific example to demonstrate your understanding of how to find propaganda.

Propaganda can be found in news and journalism, advertising and public relations, and education -- and in all aspects of daily life. It is present in politics and government, business, religious and non-profit organizations, and in many forms of entertainment including music, TV shows, movies, videogames and social media like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

1. Advertising: Advertising is a form of propaganda, but there are some differences between advertising and propaganda. Advertising supports *sales and marketing* goals. For example, McDonald's spent \$998 million to buy advertising placements in television, outdoor advertising, radio and magazines in 2013. Advertisers want to generate increased consumption of their commercial products and services by using a variety of forms of mass media and digital media to persuade readers, viewers, users or listeners. The public is generally aware of advertising and recognizes its purpose. Many forms of free mass media, including broadcast television, radio and search engines depend on selling advertising, which enables businesses to sell products and services.



Your Example: _____

2. Entertainment: Some stories are just entertainment, but many stories are also a form of propaganda. Stories offer ideas and information about good and evil, right and wrong, thus embedding values and ideology into narrative form. For example, as early as the 1930s, Warner Bros. movies offered stories that interpreted contemporary life by presenting a specific point of view on current events, often indirectly through the lens of history. In many American movies and video games, violence is depicted as justified and morally courageous, which is a value message that is generally not questioned in society. Another way that propaganda is embedded in entertainment is through *native advertising* or *sponsored content*, where a company's world view is presented as a form of entertainment. In 2014, the restaurant chain Chipotle launched an online comedy series about the agriculture industry on Hulu. Using comedy, the show reflected the company's values about sustainable agriculture and the humane treatment of animals used for meat.



Your Example: _____



3. Government and Politics: To get elected, politicians use propaganda to persuade voters. Often this involves the construction of messages that are oversimplified and that appeal to people's existing beliefs and attitudes, sometimes exploiting their fears and prejudices. Once elected, propaganda is used as a tool of governance, helping generate support for new laws or weaken political opponents. Governments also may generate war propaganda by defining battles as conflicts between good and evil. They may also use propaganda in positive ways to help improve public health. You may be familiar with *public service announcements* (PSAs) that aim to alter your behavior. For example, when researchers found that college

students overestimated how many of their peers were involved in binge drinking, they designed messages that showed that binge drinking is not as common as many people think. By reshaping perceptions of *social norms*, the campaign had a beneficial impact in helping lower the rate of binge drinking among college students.

Your Example: _____

4. Journalism and Public Relations: *Public relations* is the term used for communication professionals who seek to shape perceptions and influence public opinion on behalf of a business client. In the U.S., there are four public relations professionals for every working journalist. PR people feed journalists based on their *agenda*. They may aim to get information and positive opinions about a business into the news media by using events, video news releases, blogging, newsletters, policy documents, and social media. In general, people are not aware of how public relations efforts have shaped the content of newspaper articles, blog posts or other online information.



Your Example: _____



5. Advocacy: People who are trying to improve society or create social change use propaganda to influence public opinion. Activists try to promote social, political, economic or environmental change through using communication activities and public events that attract attention and influence people's knowledge, attitudes and opinions. For example, a group of people may *stage a public event* (like a rally, a sit-in or other public demonstration) in order to attract media attention to their cause. Sometimes advocates will use viral videos, online surveys, or celebrity spokespeople to gain support for their cause. In 2014, the advocacy group ALS raised \$41 million dollars in through a viral media campaign that involved challenging people to pour ice water over their head.

Your Example: _____

6. Education: From kindergarten to college, some forms of education are explicitly designed to lead people to accept a particular world view. 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. Many businesses and technology companies provide curriculum materials to educators which are explicitly designed to promote a particular point of view. For example, Monsanto and other biotechnology firms provide videos, lesson plans and other materials for science teachers. In Illinois, a state law mandates that schools promote a positive image for coal mining.



Your Example: _____