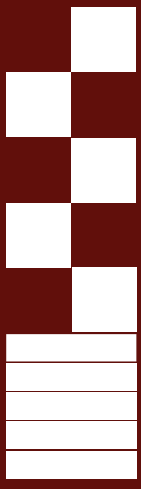
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"Control of Propaganda as a Psychological Problem" (1922)

Edward Kellog Strong, Jr.

Scientific Monthly *14, no. 3: pp. 234–52.*.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A similar piece, again authored by an academic but aimed at a popular audience, was published in *Scientific Monthly* in 1922 by Edward Strong, Jr. (1884–1963), a well-regarded professor of applied psychology at Stanford University. Strong had an undergraduate and master's degree from the University of California and took his PhD in psychology at Columbia University (1911). He worked initially in an advertising firm and during World War I in the Army's office of personnel, before settling in at Stanford in 1923.

He was, therefore, well placed to review the "problem" of propaganda, especially as it reached its crescendo of public distress in the interwar years. In the following piece, Strong addresses the myriad ways in which propaganda was used in the war, for good purposes and bad, and looks at

the continuing efforts to sway opinion in politics and commerce, where he also makes some effort to distinguish advertising from political messaging.

He explains to his readers that the psychological process whereby attitudes and sentiments can be molded is "suggestion," the "non-rational influencing of others," and he describes various categories, emphasizing the importance of emotion and motivation in the process.

Like Weeks, his aim is to submit proposals to offset or control propaganda, and he suggests that government regulation, counter-propaganda via pro-social publicity campaigns, and education could be useful in this regard. Unlike Weeks, however, he finds that each has its limits, and in the end, he concedes defeat, or at least discouragement. "Society today," he concludes, "has no way to handle it."—*P.P.*

"Control of Propaganda as a Psychological Problem" (1922)

An interesting phenomenon of the last few years has been the unanimity with which millions of men and women have conformed in their thinking and in their actions to what certain leaders wanted. Vast sums of money have been raised for liberty and victory loans, for the Red Cross and for many other agencies. Citizens of the United States consented to universal conscription, cut down their daily use of sugar, closed down their factories on certain days, and went without gasoline for their autos voluntarily and enthusiastically. To an extraordinary degree men and women in nearly all the countries of the world have cooperated in carrying out programs necessitating radical changes in their everyday life; and they have done so not because they were ordered to do so, and so were forced to it, but because they freely responded to suggestions presented in skillfully conducted propaganda.

Because of the surprising success of all this propaganda, the innumerable times it has been employed and the ease with which it has been carried out, people generally have become conscious of propaganda as a great tool or method for influencing others. Propaganda has, of course, existed for ages. But it has not been comprehended so clearly by the mass of people as it is to-day. And certainly it has never before been employed on such great numbers of men and women. To-day it is a clearly recognized method of social control.

If propaganda were a means of influencing others along lines only of benefit to society, it could be hailed with great acclaim. But unfortunately it can also be employed for dishonest and socially vicious programs, just

as well as for honest and worthwhile movements. At the present time the advertising of patent medicines that cannot possibly cure, and of stock in companies formed for no other purpose than to defraud the public, appears in altogether too many of our publications. Federal authorities estimated that in five years, 1910–15, the 2,861 swindlers that were arrested had defrauded the public of $351,000,000, averaging a dishonest gain of $123,000. All authorities are agreed that such swindling increased very greatly during the war, and possibly reached its climax sometime after the armistice. If so, it is now on the decline. Let us hope so! [...]

The question naturally arises, is there no way of controlling propaganda? Certainly there are ways and they are enforced more or less in the case of certain types of propaganda. But there are other types which are not so easily evaluated and consequently not so easily handled.

A perusal of literature on this subject gives one the impression that very few to-day are sincerely interested in the matter, except those apparently who desire to control or eliminate propaganda directed at their own. It is still viewed as highly ethical for us to sort and reject and trim in the name of our own view of truth, justice, democracy and loyalty to our group. But it is anti-social for the other fellow to do so. If we are Republicans we want the editor of our newspaper to give us good Republican views and to damn the Democrats. If we are Democrats, we want the reverse. We really want "facts" that support our views. It is too uncomfortable to be confronted with many counter "facts."

Naturally as a psychologist, I view this matter as an interesting psychological problem. It is my purpose in this place to discuss certain psychological aspects of the subject and to point out some of the ways in which propaganda may be controlled. It is also my purpose to call attention to certain types of propaganda which at present I see no way of controlling, in the hope that others may become interested in the subject and labor to work out some adequate methods.

First of all let us clarify the use of certain terms which are employed in discussing the subject and at the same time come to an understanding of the psychological elements which are involved.

The word "propaganda" means essentially the spread of a particular doctrine or a system of principles, especially when there is an organization or general plan back of the movement. Propaganda differs from "education" with which it is purposely confused, in that in the case of the former the aim is to spread one doctrine, whereas in the case of the latter the aim is to extend

a knowledge of the facts as far as known. Advertising men have never been able to agree on a definition of "advertising" and I should not want to attempt here what they have failed to do. But I think we can distinguish between advertising and propaganda by saying that advertising is usually concerned with making known and desirable a definite commodity or service with the definite aim of leading many individuals, as such, to acquire the commodity or service. Propaganda includes many types of advertising, but it is mainly concerned with the subtle presentation to the public of information so chosen and so focused that among many individuals there develops a general "point of view" which is favorable to the aim of the propagandist and leads to action in that general direction. A further distinction between these two methods of influencing people pertains to the *methods* employed rather than the *object.* The advertiser buys space upon which appears his message, and the reader knows it a paid advertisement. The propagandist may advertise, but he especially aims to employ space he did not buy, at least directly, and not to permit the reader to know that the material is propaganda. He believes his material will have greater effect when its source is unknown.

It is clear that both advertising and propaganda make use of argument and suggestion. And much has been written and said as to these two methods of influencing others. We have no quarrel in this paper with argumentative or "reason-why" appeals to the public. But we are very much concerned with appeals involving suggestion.

The term "suggestion" has been employed in a great variety of ways, sometimes in a narrow sense, but usually in a rather broad and indefinite way. Frequently it is used to cover all the means of imparting information and exerting influence other than through reasoning. Without going into the subject here, let us recognize three phases of non-rational influencing of others. In the simplest form one or more ideas are presented which are known to be associated in the minds of the audience with another idea not mentioned. The audience thinks the non-mentioned idea because of their established habits of thought. In this way a speaker may denounce most viciously and unfairly a prominent man without giving his name, by skillfully referring to one or more of his known characteristics. The desired effect is accomplished and without making it possible for the prominent man to reply. Then there is the more complicated phase of suggestion where an *action* is brought into the mind of the audience—the action being a familiar one and also one that will be desired as soon as mentioned. Thus a school boy at recess says, "Let's get a drink." The other boys might not have got-

ten a drink if they had not been reminded of the action. But as soon as it is called to mind, they feel the desire and so go. So also a nation like Germany, all primed for war, as in 1914—I don't refer here to her military preparations, but to the state of mind of her citizens—was ready to act immediately when her leaders said "Let's fight." It was the absence of just such a mental state in the United States that kept us out of war. Later on the attitude was developed—almost over-developed before it had a chance to function—and we were eager to act when the word was given.

In both these phases of suggestion the effect is produced because there exists within the mind of the person being influenced certain habits of thinking and action and when the proper stimulus or cue is given the associated thinking and acting immediately follow. There is still a third phase of suggestion, which I prefer to call motivation, in which a person is led to do something which is unfamiliar or which he would not do if it were merely mentioned. It is because of this third method of influencing others that the control of propaganda is so difficult. [...]

Motivation involves two elements—first, the arousal of a strong desire, and, second, the presentation of a certain action which appears to be a satisfactory way of expressing the aroused desire. Moreover the action in such cases is not one that the individual would perform if it were merely suggested.

The question has often been discussed: Could the United States have declared war in 1914? I think there is no doubt that there was insufficient war sentiment at that time to have permitted mere suggestions from the President to be effective. But I think there is also equally no doubt that proper propaganda would have motivated the country into war. The years 1914 to 1917 may be looked upon as a period in which such sentiment developed and was finally put into action in a calmer and far less emotional manner than usually prevails at such a time.

Recent work in psychology has emphasized the distinction between an "idea" and a "sentiment." The sentiment, according to Rivers, is an idea emotionally toned. "House" is thus an idea, whereas "home" is a sentiment, for home always includes an emotional consciousness of mother and father, brothers and sisters, old familiar associations and the like. When the sentiment becomes suppressed and lost to consciousness it is called a "complex." Sentiments and complexes, we are coming to see more and more are extremely important in explaining behavior; much of abnormal conduct being traceable to the existence of complexes.

Motivation is thus the process of deliberately developing a sentiment, of deliberately associating an idea with an emotion, of tying together in the mind of another the love for wife and the idea of buying a vacuum cleaner, or of sympathy for the Belgians and hatred of the Germans, and the idea of war.

The aim of propaganda is to develop sentiment and then precipitate action through mere suggestion. Let us consider some implications which are involved in all this.

First of all let us note that theoretically any emotional element can be associated with any specific line of action. Practically, certain combinations are difficult to accomplish, but theoretically they are possible. Thus, the correspondence school arouses the boy's love for his mother and challenges him to make her proud of him and "funnels" the aroused emotional desire into taking a correspondence course. The same appeal could be utilized to get young men to go to church, to quit gambling, to work harder for their employer, to enlist when war is declared, to do anything the boy could be made to believe his mother would approve of. [...]

Propaganda depends upon this psychological process of motivation for its success. And motivation, as we have seen, is the deliberate process of arousing one's emotions and desires and then suggesting a line of action by which these desires may be expressed. And we have seen further that any emotional element can be associated with any specific action; and that when one is well motivated he ignores intellectual considerations touching upon the honesty of the statements or the efficacy of the program.

So much for our analysis of motivation—the principal psychological process in propaganda. Now let us consider how propaganda may be controlled by society so that dishonest and pernicious campaigns may be prevented without interference to worthwhile propaganda.

The most convenient method of considering the many angles of the subject will be through discussing propaganda in terms of the following three aspects: First, propaganda considered with regard to the truth or falsity of the statements in which it is presented; second, with regard to the action suggested as the means of satisfying the aroused desire; and third, with regard to the emotional element, the desire that is aroused. The matter of control can accordingly be discussed in terms of these three questions: First, how far can propaganda be controlled in terms of the validity of the statements which are made? Second, to what extent can propaganda be controlled in terms of the action which is proposed? And third, to what extent can propaganda be controlled in terms of the emotional elements that are involved?

First of all, then, how far can propaganda be controlled in terms of the validity of the statements which are made?

Society has long dealt with false statements and already has postal regulations, laws against slander, libel and the like. To protect politicians the English law provides a fine not to exceed £100 if the name and address of the printer and publisher is omitted from a poster relating to the candidature of any person for Parliament and other offices. The Association of Advertising Clubs of the World carries on a steady campaign against dishonest advertising and has accomplished a great deal of good against this type of propaganda. At this time, thirty-six states have passed the Printers' Ink Statute or a modification of it, thereby facilitating convictions in such cases. And the Association of Advertising Clubs of the World is spending money and effort in enforcing it. Control of propaganda publicly making dishonest statements can clearly be taken care of.

But unfortunately many undesirable propaganda will not fall under the class of propaganda publicly making dishonest statements. One very undesirable sort is spread by word of mouth. No one knows from when it comes, and exactly what is back of it. We had many stories thus circulated against the Germans during the war, and we have the same sort of thing carried on against prominent men almost all the time. Stories of Roosevelt's excessive drinking were thus circulated. And it was not until they were publicly expressed that he had an opportunity of disposing of them through law suit. Such word of mouth propaganda is fostered in times of emotional stress and particularly wherever people believe they are not being told all the facts. The best possible cure for it is publicity of the sort that makes people *believe* they are getting all sides to the question.

But in addition to this sneaking underhand propaganda there are all sorts of campaigns which are very undesirable, but which adhere technically to the truth. They cannot accordingly be prosecuted for dishonesty. Some of them, however, give false impressions just the same. This is so because the human brain does not necessarily think in a logical manner. […]

To require that propaganda contain truths and not falsehoods is a desirable regulation, but it will not stop undesirable campaigns.

Let us consider second to what extent propaganda can be controlled in terms of the action which is proposed.

If the proposed action is that of buying, it is not difficult to evaluate the propaganda, or advertising as it would usually be in this case, upon the grounds that the individual did or did not get value received. But if the pro-

posed action is that of giving money for some cause or charity, justification upon such grounds is far more difficult. If a woman, very fond of cats, wants to endow a hospital for them, run by thoroughly incompetent people whom she likes, isn't that sufficient to justify her action and the propaganda, as far as she is concerned? It is hard to attack such action in terms of the rights of individuals, but it is being more and more attacked upon the grounds of social welfare. Businessmen through their Chambers of Commerce in sheer defense are increasingly investigating such propositions and, in many places, list the charities that they will countenance. Out of the war has come the Community Chest movement whereby all social agencies in a district make up their budgets in advance and after they have been gone over by both disinterested and interested parties, a single united effort is made to raise the total amount in one campaign for the year. Such plans help the worthy cause and interfere with the unworthy one. But they do not eliminate the unworthy campaigns.

The establishment of bureaus, whose business it is to investigate all organizations asking for funds—organizations like the National Information Bureau—renders it easier to determine whether any organization is desirable or not. Can society go farther here? Can society not only positively help the worthy cause, but put the unworthy, inefficient or unnecessarily duplicating agency out of business? There is no question but that many individuals are being fooled every year and much money squandered through such non-worthwhile causes. But at the same time, we must remember that most new uplift movements have encountered great opposition at the start, and to increase this opposition still more through the establishment of legal regulations may do society in the long run more harm than good.

In addition to campaigns to sell a commodity or service or to obtain gifts, there are other campaigns devoted to accomplishing specific actions of a sort much more difficult to estimate fairly. Political campaigns aim to secure votes for certain men; propaganda appears from time to time to influence citizens to vote for or against certain measures; propaganda appeared in many forms a short time ago, appealing to citizens of the United States to intervene in Mexico; lobbies are familiar accompaniments to our legislatures, each one aiming to accomplish a specific program; unions appeal to public opinion to aid them in winning a strike and companies appeal to the same public to help them prevent or break the strike, etc. We are so accustomed to our political machinery that we do not often stop and ask ourselves whether it is geared up so as to serve society in the best way. Only when some enthusiastic social

uplifter boasts that she and four others alone put a measure through a state legislature by the use of skillful lobbying, or a secretary of a business man's organization calmly announces months in advance that Congress will do away with a bureau because his organization is demanding such action, and his prophecy comes true, does one wonder whether some sort of control of propaganda would not be worthwhile even here. And one waxes quite indignant, as did a former Secretary of War, when he comes to realize that much of the propaganda for bringing back the bodies of our dead soldiers was instigated by the journal of the undertakers and casket makers.

To control such propaganda we must have facts and we must have a body to review the facts. This we do not have in many cases. A political campaign on a clean-cut issue is supposed to be a trial as to the merits of the two sides before all the citizens who through their votes decide the issue. This is the theory of democracy. It works pretty well in many cases, surprisingly well in some. But in most campaigns the issue is not clean-cut and in nearly all campaigns the political strategist endeavors to confuse the issue, so that many a time a citizen votes against what he really wants. And then there are many measures coming up in our fearfully complex life of to-day upon which the average man is not at all competent to pass judgment. Except in a few instances, society has not yet organized itself so as properly to handle such matters. In the case of struggles between capital and labor, we are steadily advancing toward the insistence upon both sides that they shall present the facts as they see them and also toward the establishment of tribunals which shall weigh all the facts and decide the issue. The impartial chairmanship program maintained by the clothing industry in Chicago and other cities has worked very satisfactorily and seems to be the ideal machinery for controlling propaganda in that field. Its greatest merit lies, it seems to me, in the fact that complaints are studied and evaluated very shortly after they arise, thus eliminating the getting under headway of extensive propaganda with all the arousal of emotions that propaganda assures. [...]

So far we have considered the possibilities of controlling propaganda from the two aspects: first, as to whether the statements in it were true or false; and second, as to whether the proposed action was socially worth while or not. This discussion has seemingly emphasized the necessity of taking motives into account. Now let us consider the third aspect of the subject—the element of aroused desire, the emotional background and psychologically true cause of the action.

We have seen that theoretically any emotion may be aroused as the basis for stirring one to act and that there needs be little or no rational connection between the two. The detailed suffering of a little girl and her kitten can motivate our hatred against the Germans, arouse our sympathy for the Armenians, make us enthusiastic for the Red Cross, or lead us to give money for support of a home for cats. The story may be true or concocted for the purpose; the inferences against the Germans or for the home for cats may be also true or false; the organization carrying on the propaganda may be efficiently administered or not—all these considerations little concern us. We feel the emotion, we want to do something because by acting we will feel better, and away we go regardless of mere intellectual considerations.

Here is the real psychological problem concerning propaganda. Take away the emotional element and society need have no fear of propaganda. For man is always very slow to act in terms of ideas alone. Witness his indifference when he really knows the political organization in control of his municipality is flagrantly dishonest. He does nothing until his emotions are aroused by a whirlwind speaker, or by personal injury. So long as a radical writes or speaks in a philosophical manner society can rightly be indifferent. But when he discards the intellectual aspects of his views, seizes upon some slogan and fills his writings or speeches with concrete tales of human suffering and the arrogance of the rich, society rightly becomes alarmed. For now the radical is setting fire to dynamite and neither he nor any one else can tell what may result.

At the present time the prospects do not appear over bright of controlling propaganda through regulation. There is, however, a method of weakening its influence, and that is by fighting one propaganda by another, or by general publicity. The trouble, however, with fighting bad propaganda by good propaganda, aside from the very practical consideration that the former is usually better equipped financially, is that seldom is the public supplied with facts upon which a real conclusion can be thought out. Instead it is inflamed to take sides and a deadlock results, or the matter is settled by some sort of resort to force. Just in this way arose the turmoil about the League of Nations program. Instead of thinking it through and arriving rationally at a real conclusion, Wilsonites and anti-Wilsonites became emotionally aroused and it was voted down because the latter group had the greater force measured in votes. Both sides know the real issue is not dead, and the Republicans who defeated Wilson's program are now attempting at Washington to find

the conclusions we should have reached months ago. Fighting propaganda with propaganda is not likely, then, to give us satisfactory results.

Can propaganda be controlled through publicity? Yes, if we had perfect publicity. But that, apparently, we cannot have. Hence, we can only hope to have partial control by this means. It has been suggested that propaganda could be controlled by national control of all publicity. Would such regulated and censored publicity help here? [...]

Possibly publicity is the one best cure we have today for handling those forms of propaganda which are not readily controlled by other means. But if this is the case it means that more of our newspapers and magazines will have to convince the public that what they print is not controlled by certain interests. At the present time I should judge that great numbers of citizens believe most newspapers, if not their own, distort the facts to fit their purposes. And again, if publicity is to cure the evils of propaganda, it means that society must work out some more satisfactory method than now exists of providing the groups of poor people with adequate publicity to offset the enormous advantage that groups composed of wealthy people have in commanding the printed page. Too few newspapers print to-day, and too few can ever afford to print, the detailed testimony in a labor controversy, yet unless the laboring man feels his side is presented, he will have supplied to him and will read wild denunciations of capital instead of the sworn testimony of his leaders as given before a board of arbitration.

Another means of controlling propaganda lies in educating the public to an understanding of the methods employed in propaganda. It is thought that man likes to feel he is being appealed to on logical grounds: that he resents being "soft-soaped." And that he does not want to be "worked" or to have something "put over on him." Possibly, it is contended, articles such as have appeared recently in our magazines recounting the methods by which propagandists have fooled men and women may educate the public to see through a publicity campaign. Personally, I do not believe that very much can be accomplished in this way, for, as Barnum claimed, the public likes to be fooled; and secondly, clever appeals to the emotions will nearly always win when pitted against intellectually held convictions.

In closing, I want to emphasize one point. It is possible today for a group to carry on a very subtle propaganda with the immediate aim of developing some sentiment. There is no machinery to stop them, whether the sentiment is socially good or bad. For sentiment is an emotional state of mind and as long as no action results, society today has no way to handle it.