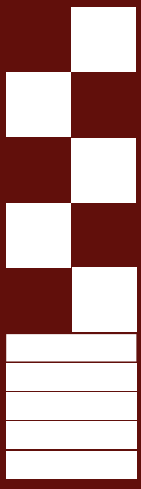
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"The Theory of Political Propaganda" (1927)

Harold D. Lasswell

American Political Science Review *21, no. 3: pp. 627–31 [with elisions].*

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

While research and commentary on propaganda was voluminous in this period, one of the few works still remembered by contemporary media scholars (for some, perhaps, the *only* work) was by Harold Lasswell (1902–1978). Lasswell's undergraduate (1922) and doctoral (1926) degrees were from the University of Chicago; he spent most of his academic career on the faculties of the University of Chicago and, after World War II, Yale University.

Lasswell was an historic figure in media studies and in political science. According to one biographer, he "ranked among the half dozen creative innovators in the social sciences in the twentieth century" (Almond 1987). Schramm, as noted earlier, rather famously anointed him one of the four "founding fathers" of mass communications research, along with Hovland, Lazarsfeld, and Lewin. His contributions to the field included the "Who (says) What (to) Whom (in) What Channel (with) What Effect" functional

model of analysis, the advancement of the content analytical method, and his early work on propaganda.

While some described his 1927 *Propaganda Technique in the World War* as the origin of the "magic bullet" model (Lubken 2008), Lasswell, in fact, characterized propaganda in that classic text as the "direct use of suggestion," noting that "propaganda is concerned with the management of opinions and attitudes by the direct manipulation of social suggestion" (9).

Propaganda, like the above entries, was a work designed both for academics and for the general public. In a companion article in the *American Political Science Review*, reprinted below, Lasswell goes into greater theoretical detail, for the academic community, on the psychological mechanisms of opinion change. He describes the process from various perspectives, including behavioristic stimulus-response, cultural, and suggestion theory. Here he stipulates a pronounced difference in his definition of suggestion compared with that typically used by social psychologists. "Suggestion," he states, "is not used as it is in individual psychology to mean the acceptance of an idea without reflection; it refers to cultural material with a recognizable meaning."

His preferred approach throughout is cultural and psychoanalytic (influenced by Freud). "Propaganda is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols," he explains. He adopts the concept of "collective attitudes" from anthropology to distinguish social beliefs and opinions from the metaphysical forms of French crowd theory, and he describes in detail the myriad ways in which propagandists representing all types of public and private organizations harness the mass media for the practical manipulation of attitudes.

His piece is more analytical than prescriptive, although later in his career Lasswell advocated the application of social science to the improvement of democratic processes.—*P.P.*

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Almond, Gabriel. 1987. "Harold Dwight Lasswell." In *Biographical Memoirs*: Volume 57, edited by the National Academy of Sciences, 249–76. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Lubken, Deborah. 2008. "Remembering the Straw Man: The Travels and Adventures of Hypodermic." In *The History of Media and Communication Research*, edited by David W. Park and Jefferson Pooley, 19–42. New York: Peter Lang.

"The Theory of Political Propaganda" (1927)

Propaganda is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols. The word attitude is taken to mean a tendency to act according to certain patterns of valuation. The existence of an attitude is not a direct datum of experience, but an inference from signs which have a conventionalized significance. We say that the voters of a certain ward resent a negro candidate, and in so doing we have compactly summarized the tendency of a particular group to act toward a particular object in a specific context. The valuational patterns upon which this inference is founded may be primitive gestures of the face and body, or more sophisticated gestures of the pen and voice. Taken together, these objects which have a standard meaning in a group are called significant symbols. The elevated eyebrow, the clenched fist, the sharp voice, the pungent phrase, have their references established within the web of a particular culture. Such significant symbols are paraphernalia employed in expressing the attitudes, and they are also capable of being employed to reaffirm or redefine attitudes. Thus, significant symbols have both an expressive and a propagandist function in public life.

The idea of a "collective attitude" is not that of a super-organic, extra-natural entity. Collective phenomena have too often been treated as if they were on a plane apart from individual action. Confusion has arisen principally because students have been slow to invent a word able to bear the connotation of uniformity without also implying a biological or metaphysical unity. The anthropologists have introduced the notion of a pattern to designate the standard uniformities of conduct at a given time and place, and this is the sense of the word here intended. Thus the collective attitude, as a pattern, is a distribution of individual acts and not an indwelling spirit which has achieved transitory realization in the rough, coarse facts of the world of sense.

Collective attitudes are amenable to many modes of alteration. They may be shattered before an onslaught of violent intimidation or disintegrated by economic coercion. They may be reaffirmed in the muscular regimentation of drill. But their arrangement and rearrangement occurs principally under the impetus of significant symbols; and the technique of using significant symbols for this purpose is propaganda.

Propaganda as a word is closely allied in popular and technical usage with certain others. It must be distinguished from education. We need a name for the processes by which techniques are inculcated—techniques of spelling, letter-forming, adding, piano-playing, and lathe-handling. If this

be education, we are free to apply the term propaganda to the creation of valuational dispositions or attitudes.

The deliberative attitude is capable of being separated from the propagandist attitude. Deliberation implies the search for the solution of a besetting problem with no desire to prejudice a particular solution in advance. The propagandist is very much concerned about how a specific solution is to be evoked and "put over." And though the most subtle propaganda closely resembles disinterested deliberation, there is no difficulty in distinguishing the extremes.

What is the relation between propaganda and the changing of opinions through psychiatric interviews? Such an interview is an intensive approach to the individual by means of which the interviewer gains access to the individual's private stock of meanings and becomes capable of exploiting them rather than the standard meanings of the groups of which the individual is a member. The intimate, continuing relationship which is set up under quasi-clinical conditions is quite beyond the reach of the propagandist, who must restrict himself to dealing with the individual as a standard member of some groups or sub-groups which he differentiates upon the basis of extrinsic evidence.[1]

Propagandas may be classified upon the basis of many possible criteria. Some are carried on by organizations like the Anti-Cigarette League which have a definite and restricted objective; others are conducted by organizations, like most civic associations, which have a rather general and diffused purpose. This objective may be revolutionary or counter-revolutionary, reformist or counter-reformist, depending upon whether or not a sweeping institutional change is involved. Propaganda may be carried on by organizations which rely almost exclusively upon it or which use it as an auxiliary implement among several means of social control. Some propagandas are essentially temporary, like the boosters' club for a favorite son, or comparatively permanent. Some propagandas are intra-group, in the sense that they exist to consolidate an existing attitude and not, like the extra-group propagandas, to assume the additional burden of proselyting. There are propagandas which are manned by those who hope to reap direct, tangible, and substantial gains from them; others are staffed by those who are content with a remote, intangible, and rather imprecise advantage to themselves. Some are run by men who make it their life work, and others are handled by amateurs. Some depend upon a central or skeleton staff and others rely

[1] Advertising is paid publicity and may or may not be employed in propaganda.

upon widespread and catholic associations. One propaganda group may flourish in secret and another may invite publicity.

Besides all these conceivable and often valuable distinctions, propagandas may be conveniently divided according to the object toward which it is proposed to modify or crystallize an attitude. Some propagandas exist to organize an attitude toward a person, like Mr. Coolidge or Mr. Smith; others to organize an attitude toward a group, like the Japanese or the workers; others to organize an attitude toward a policy or institution, like free trade or parliamentary government; and still others to organize an attitude toward a mode of personal participation, like buying war bonds or joining the marines. No propaganda fits tightly into its category of major emphasis, and it must be remembered that pigeon-holes are invented to serve convenience and not to satisfy yearnings for the immortal and the immutable.

If we state the strategy of propaganda in cultural terms, we may say that it involves the presentation of an object in a culture in such a manner that certain cultural attitudes will be organized toward it. The problem of the propagandist is to intensify the attitudes favorable to his purpose, to reverse the attitudes hostile to it, and to attract the indifferent, or, at the worst, to prevent them from assuming a hostile bent.

Every cultural group has its vested values. These may include the ownership of property or the possession of claims to ceremonial deference. An object toward which it is hoped to arouse hostility must be presented as a menace to as many of these values as possible. There are always ambitious hopes of increasing values, and the object must be made to appear as the stumbling block to their realization. There are patterns of right and wrong, and the object must be made to flout the good. There are standards of propriety, and the object must appear ridiculous and gauche. If the plan is to draw out positive attitudes toward an object, it must be presented, not as a menace and an obstruction, nor as despicable or absurd, but as a protector of our values, a champion of our dreams, and a model of virtue and propriety.

Propaganda objects must be chosen with extreme care. The primary objects are usually quite distinct. Thus war propaganda involves the enemy, the ally, and the neutral. It involves leaders on both sides and the support of certain policies and institutions. It implies the control of attitudes toward various forms of participation—enlistment, bond buying, and strenuous exertion. These, and similar objects, are conspicuously entangled in the context of the total situation, and the propagandist can easily see that he must deal with them. But some are contingently and not primarily implicated. They

are important in the sense that unless precautions are taken attention may be inconveniently diverted to them. The accumulating unrest of a nation may be turned by social revolutionaries into an outburst against the government which distracts the hostility of the community from the enemy, and breakdown ensues. War propaganda must therefore include the social revolutionist as an object of hostility, and all propaganda must be conceived with sufficient scope to embrace these contingent objects.

The strategy of propaganda, which has been phrased in cultural terms, can readily be described in the language of stimulus-response. Translated into this vocabulary, which is especially intelligible to some, the propagandist may be said to be concerned with the multiplication of those stimuli which are best calculated to evoke the desired responses, and with the nullification of those stimuli which are likely to instigate the undesired responses. Putting the same thing into terms of social suggestion, the problem of the propagandist is to multiply all the suggestions favorable to the attitudes which he wishes to produce and strengthen, and to restrict all suggestions which are unfavorable to them. In this sense of the word, suggestion is not used as it is in individual psychology to mean the acceptance of an idea without reflection; it refers to cultural material with a recognizable meaning.

Whatever form of words helps to ignite the imagination of the practical manipulator of attitudes is the most valuable one. Terminological difficulties disappear when we turn from the problem of choosing propaganda matter to discuss the specific carriers of propaganda material. The form in which the significant symbols are embodied to reach the public may be spoken, written, pictorial, or musical, and the number of stimulus carriers is infinite. If the propagandist identifies himself imaginatively with the life of his subjects in a particular situation, he is able to explore several channels of approach. Consider, for a moment, the people who ride the street cars. They may be reached by placards posted inside the car, by posters on the billboards along the track, by newspapers which they read, by conversations which they overhear, by leaflets which are openly or surreptitiously slipped into their hands, by street demonstrations at halting places, and no doubt by other means. Of these possible occasions there are no end. People walk along the streets or ride in automobiles, trams, and subways, elevated trains, boats, electrical or steam railways; they congregate in theatres, churches, lecture halls, eating places, athletic parks, concert rooms, barber shops and beauty parlors, coffee-houses and drug stores; people work in offices, warehouses, mills, factories, and conveyances. An inspection of the life patterns of any

community reveals the web of mobility routes and congregating centres through which interested fact and opinion may be disseminated.

Propaganda rose to transitory importance in the past whenever a social system based upon the sanctions of antiquity was broken up by a tyrant. The ever-present function of propaganda in modern life is in large measure attributable to the social disorganization which has been precipitated by the rapid advent of technological changes. Impersonality has supplanted personal loyalty to leaders. Literacy and the physical channels of communication have quickened the connection between those who rule and the ruled. Conventions have arisen which favor the ventilation of opinions and the taking of votes. Most of that which formerly could be done by violence and intimidation must now be done by argument and persuasion. Democracy has proclaimed the dictatorship of palaver, and the technique of dictating to the dictator is named propaganda.