Propaganda is information that is not objective and is used primarily to influence an audience and further an agenda, often by presenting facts selectively to encourage a particular synthesis or perception, or using loaded language to produce an emotional rather than a rational response to the information that is presented.[1]Propaganda is often associated with material prepared by governments, but historically activist groups, companies and the media have also produced propaganda.

One of the most recent and popular examples of public propaganda has been that of the 2016 USA elections, where it has been conclusively proven (By foreign and USA backed agencies) that Donald Trump, the presidential winner, who against all odds and public opinion “trumped” the election, won a significant chunk of his votes due to the “interference” by the Russian government. The Russian government leveraged social media platforms among other media, to bend public opinion towards the candidate they preferred, to sit on the most powerful seat in the world.

However, propaganda is not new. It has been used to great effect since the existence of human conflict, which has been omnipresent since the existence of men. Only in the twentieth century, has the term propaganda been associated with a manipulative approach, propaganda, though historically has been a neutral descriptive term.

*Propaganda* is a modern Latin word, the gerundive form of *propagare*, meaning *to spread* or *to propagate*, thus *propaganda* means *that which is to be propagated*.[5]Originally this word derived from a new administrative body of the Catholic church created in 1622, called the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*(*Congregation for Propagating the Faith*), or informally simply *Propaganda*.[2][6] Its activity was aimed at "propagating" the Catholic faith in non-Catholic countries.[2]

From the 1790s, the term began being used also to refer to *propaganda* in secular activities.[2] The term began taking a pejorative or negative connotation in the mid-19th century, when it was used in the political sphere.[2]

Propaganda may be administered in deceptive ways. For instance, disparaging disinformation about the history of certain groups or foreign countries may be encouraged or tolerated in the educational system. Since few people actually double-check what they learn at school, such disinformation will be repeated by journalists as well as parents, thus reinforcing the idea that the disinformation item is really a "well-known fact", even though no one repeating the myth is able to point to an authoritative source. The disinformation is then recycled in the media and in the educational system, without the need for direct governmental intervention on the media. Such permeating propaganda may be used for political goals: by giving citizens a false impression of the quality or policies of their country, they may be incited to reject certain proposals or certain remarks or ignore the experience of others.

This is one of the reasons why, especially in India there is a huge hue and cry regarding the school textbooks, every time a new political party takes centre stage. Most recently, the new BJP government has been trying to encourage more “Hindutva savvy” content in the textbooks, such that their large voter base of Hindu extremists do not feel alienated.

This is not a new development, even in India. The previous political parties, such as Congress, too have been known to ban caricatures and cartoons from the national NCERT school syllabus, simply because they did not depict the party’s past and present leaders in a positive light.

However, all this is small change compared to the scale on which propaganda was used to alter public perception during the World Wars. Both sides of the war used this as a weapon to devastating effect.

Propaganda is a powerful weapon in war. It is used to dehumanize and create hatred toward a supposed enemy, either internal or external, by creating a false image in the mind of soldiers and citizens.

Propaganda is one of the key methods used in psychological warfare, which may also involve false flag operations in which the identity of the operatives is depicted as those of an enemy nation (e.g., The Bay of Pigs invasion used CIA planes painted in Cuban Air Force markings). The term propaganda may also refer to false information meant to reinforce the mindsets of people who already believe as the propagandist wishes (e.g., During the First World War, the main purpose of British propaganda was to encourage men join the army, and women to work in the country’s industry. The propaganda posters were used, because radios and TVs were not very common at that time.).

The assumption is that, if people believe something false, they will constantly be assailed by doubts. Since these doubts are unpleasant (see cognitive dissonance), people will be eager to have them extinguished, and are therefore receptive to the reassurances of those in power. For this reason propaganda is often addressed to people who are already sympathetic to the agenda or views being presented. This process of reinforcement uses an individual's predisposition to self-select "agreeable" information sources as a mechanism for maintaining control over populations.

A popular version of this is the quote, ”Repeat the lie oft enough and it becomes a truth”.

Identifying propaganda has always been a problem. The main difficulties have involved differentiating propaganda from other types of persuasion, and avoiding a biased approach.

However, many people have tried their hand in simplifying the quagmire of propaganda:

Richard Alan Nelson provides a definition of the term: "Propaganda is neutrally defined as a systematic 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."[21]The definition focuses on the communicative process involved — or more precisely, on the purpose of the process, and allow "propaganda" to be considered objectively and then interpreted as positive or negative behaviour depending on the perspective of the viewer or listener.

The propagandist seeks to change the way people understand an issue or situation for the purpose of changing their actions and expectations in ways that are desirable to the interest group. Propaganda, in this sense, serves as a corollary to censorship in which the same purpose is achieved, not by filling people's minds with approved information, but by preventing people from being confronted with opposing points of view. What sets propaganda apart from other forms of advocacy is the willingness of the propagandist to change people's understanding through deception and confusion rather than persuasion and understanding. The leaders of an organization know the information to be one sided or untrue, but this may not be true for the rank and file members who help to disseminate the propaganda.

Propaganda though is an effective tool to alter and polarize public opinion. Whether be it for the “positive” or for the “negative”.

In the early 20th century, propaganda was exemplified in the form of party slogans. Propaganda also has much in common with public information campaigns by governments, which are intended to encourage or discourage certain forms of behaviour (such as wearing seat belts, not smoking, not littering and so forth).

Even today mass media and political campaigns such as the “Swachh Bharat” campaign try to fully optimize their efficacy by utilizing the power of propaganda.

Is this so negative then?

If you read the definitions again, then you notice a lack of positive or negative tone to it.

The Dune Effect explains that those individuals who control the media have access and potential control of the public’s opinions. Everyone who is a part of society is susceptible to propaganda. Propaganda is a powerful tool and is a piece of our society that can be used for good, and sometimes bad. It is important to be able to recognize it.

According to historian Zbyněk Zeman, propaganda is defined as either white, grey or black. White propaganda openly discloses its source and intent. Grey propaganda has an ambiguous or non-disclosed source or intent. Black propaganda purports to be published by the enemy or some organization besides its actual origins[22] (compare with black operation, a type of clandestine operation in which the identity of the sponsoring government is hidden). In scale, these different types of propaganda can also be defined by the potential of true and correct information to compete with the propaganda. For example, opposition to white propaganda is often readily found and may slightly discredit the propaganda source. Opposition to grey propaganda, when revealed (often by an inside source), may create some level of public outcry. Opposition to black propaganda is often unavailable and may be dangerous to reveal, because public cognizance of black propaganda tactics and sources would undermine or backfire the very campaign the black propagandist supported.

My personal take on propaganda though is slightly different. I don’t have afflictions towards propaganda but neither do I condemn harshly the people who use it. I just wish to draw the attention to the unwritten rule here, that, “History is written by victors”.

Is it any co-incidence that we associate the words “Wartime Propaganda” almost instantly to images of Hitler, Goebbels and Nazi Germany, along with horrific images of the Holocaust?

Why not with the atrocities committed by the receding troops of the Allies on their way back to their home countries?

I also believe in the maxim of, “The Survival of the Fittest” along with “History is written by Victors”. Some people find this demoralising and sad. I, on the other hand, somehow take the optimistic route.

Propaganda is simply nothing but a tool. The ability to manipulate or polarize people towards your cause is like any other power, ability or skill.

I would just pay heed to the immortal words of Uncle Ben in the Spider-Man comics, “With great power comes great responsibility”. The wielder of a powerful sword better know when and where to swing.