

# Propaganda: The Formation Of Men's Attitudes By Jacques Ellul

A Review by David Edwards

Jacques Ellul published this lengthy analysis of the techniques of propaganda in 1962, with the aim of presenting an objective sociological exploration of the methods used to manipulate group opinions into action.

He remarks in the preface;

*"Not only is propaganda itself a technique, it is also an indispensable condition for the development of technical progress and the establishment of a technological civilisation."*

It is difficult to conduct a statistical analysis, reliant on clinically reproduced empirical data, on the effects of propaganda. This is due to the technique's uniquely collectivised and subjective attributes and effects, which are largely dependent on the unreproducible and specific factors of situation and context.

His text exploring propaganda is based more in observational sociological analysis, similar to [Le Bon](#)'s exploration of mass psychology, and less like [Bernays](#)' or [Packard](#)'s example laden anecdotes whilst exploring public relations and motivational research in advertising.

Like all forms of marketing, it is important for the propagandist to know the cultural context, customs, current thought and stereotypes of the audience to be targeted, as whilst propaganda seeks to shape the environment both physical and mental, it must first have a broad scope of the terrain from which this desired vision is to be moulded.

Propaganda is a method of inventing unambiguous political myths, to inspire its subjects to action, or accepting a desired viewpoint with little resistance or debate.

*"Through the myth it creates, propaganda imposes a complete range of intuitive knowledge, susceptible of only one interpretation, unique and one-sided, and precluding any divergence. The myth becomes so powerful that it invades every area of consciousness, leaving no faculty or motivation intact."*

The author attempts to put aside ethical judgements on the nature of propaganda, and its common associations with evil manipulation, in his effort to present an overall objective observation of the characteristics of what he terms as *"an existing sociological phenomenon"*.

Ellul draws on three major ideological comparisons throughout his analysis of varying methods of propaganda: U.S. Liberal Democracy, Soviet and Maoist Communism, and Hitlerian National Socialism.

*"Despite a general belief, propaganda is not a simple phenomenon, and one cannot lump together all of its forms. Types of propaganda can be distinguished by the regimes that employ them."*

He also emphasises the difference between overt or active and covert or inactive propaganda, in that the former is designed to agitate to direct action, and is more reactionary, whilst the latter is more subtle and enacts a more nuanced response. Ellul develops this distinction throughout the book, more specifically identifying the difference as political and sociological propaganda. The former is organisational, and usually carried out by a government or political party to influence attitudes to policy, whilst the latter is usually societal, and used to promote public integration of social values and adherence to group norms.

*"In the midst of increasing mechanization and technological organization, propaganda is simply the means used to prevent these things from being felt as too oppressive and to persuade man to submit with good grace."*

The first chapter of the book concentrates on defining and subdividing differing forms of propaganda to try and define it, usually by comparing two differing forms of propaganda with each other. In addition to covert and overt distinctions, Ellul compares sociological and political propaganda, agitation and integration propaganda, vertical and horizontal propaganda, and rational and irrational propaganda. In each distinction the author largely compares the contrast between more aggressive, engineered forms of managing perception by organisations for short term gain, compared with more subtle and organic means of engendering social conformity for more long term benefit. In most of the distinctions, one generally seems to necessarily blend into the other, as in the example of agitation propaganda and integration propaganda.

*"Propaganda of agitation, being the most visible and widespread, generally attacks all the attention. It is most often subversive propaganda and has the stamp of opposition. It is led by a party seeking to destroy the government or the established order. It seeks rebellion or war. It has always had a place in the course of history. All revolutionary movements, all popular wars have been nourished by propaganda of agitation. ...*

*... Integration propaganda aims at stabilizing the social body, at unifying and reinforcing it. It is thus the preferred instrument of government, though properly speaking it is not exclusively political propaganda."*

In his somewhat protracted sub-definitions of propaganda, Ellul emphasises the long game needed for an effective propaganda campaign, with the aim in the propaganda of his age (the 1960s) of covertly building towards inciting action, rather than to overtly change attitudes or beliefs.

In the various distinctions, a pattern emerges where the reader can establish that the overall antithetical divergence is between impulsive forms of the phenomenon and more cautious ones.

With this in mind, the author states that, contrary to popular opinion, propaganda campaigns should aim to work with pre-existing beliefs and attitudes, that can of course have been prepared by pre-existing propaganda campaigns.

In his many sub-distinctions of propaganda Ellul establishes two sets of oppositions that are of particular interest.

The first of these distinctions of note is between political and sociological propaganda, where the former is of use to an organisation for tactical or strategic ends. The latter, sociological propaganda is explained as less employed by an organisational structure, but more as the means by which a society propagates and inflates its particular way of life.

Political propaganda is what usually springs to the forefront when discussions of propaganda as a whole occur, as sociological propaganda is far less overt, more subtle and more immersive.

*"Sociological propaganda is a phenomenon much more difficult to*

*grasp than political propaganda, and is rarely discussed. **Basically it is the penetration of an ideology by means of its sociological context.** ...*

*... Such propaganda is essentially diffuse.*

*... It creates new habits in him; it is a sort of persuasion from within.*

*... Sociological propaganda produces a progressive adaptation to a certain order of things, a certain concept of human relations, which unconsciously molds individuals and makes them conform to society.*

*Sociological propaganda springs up spontaneously; it is not the result of deliberate propaganda action. No propagandists deliberately use this method, though many practice it unwittingly, and tend in this direction without realizing it. ...*

*... just as with ordinary propaganda, it is a matter of propagating behavior and myths both good and bad. Furthermore, such propaganda becomes increasingly effective when those subjected to it accept its doctrines on what is good or bad (for example, the American Way of Life). There, a whole society actually expresses itself through this propaganda by advertising its kind of life.*

*... This leads people to believe that the civilization representing their way of life is the best."*

With the observation that sociological propaganda not only works immersively, but also more precisely and adapts itself steadily to its mental and physical environments over time, Ellul's further distinction between vertical and horizontal propaganda also echoes the previous distinction. It is here that a similarity between the spread of Maoism in China and the manner in which American culture propagates itself can clearly be noticed.

The vertical/horizontal distinction echoes the political/horizontal one, and Ellul emphasises this clearly. He conceptualises how organisational or political propaganda spreads from the top down, in a vertical fashion, whilst sociological or cultural propaganda spreads more fluidly through the members of a society, and thus provide a better illusion of being an organic process. In this sense, horizontal propaganda is more pernicious, as it masquerades under the guise of not resembling propaganda at all.

*"To produce "voluntary" rather than mechanical adherence, and to create a solution that is "found" by the individual rather than imposed from above, is indeed a very advanced method, much more effective and binding than the mechanical action of vertical propaganda. When the individual is mechanized, he can be manipulated easily. But to put the individual in a position where he apparently has freedom of choice and still obtain from him what one expects, is much more subtle and risky."*

Vertical propaganda produces a mechanised response, and large forms groupings of atomised, de-personalised individuals, reduced to constituent parts who respond to a clearly defined leader. This type of propaganda is classically associated with autocratic dictatorship and overtly authoritarian regimes.

Horizontal propaganda is more based in group dynamics, and its association is with socialist models of government, where conformity to group norms becomes a veiled demand as opposed to a choice. Incidentally this is a power dynamic in which many cults tend to operate. Of course, all propaganda is most effective when working on the individuals' subconscious drive to integrate and conform into larger groupings.

*"The individual's adherence to his group is "conscious" because he is aware of it and recognizes it, but it is ultimately involuntary because he is trapped in a dialectic and in a group that leads him unfailingly to this adherence. His adherence is also "intellectual" because he can express his conviction clearly and logically, but it is not **genuine** because the information, the data, the reasoning that have led him to adhere to the group were themselves deliberately falsified in order to lead him there.*

*But the most remarkable characteristic of horizontal propaganda is the small group. The individual participates actively in the life of this group, in a genuine and lively dialogue."*

Many forms of impulsive propaganda go hand in hand with organisational structures, and are almost always used to subversively promote the ideology of these collective groupings, whether they be political, religious, or business affiliated.

*"Propaganda is made, first of all, because of a will to action, for the purpose of effectively arming policy and giving irresistible power to its*

*decisions."*

Propaganda has to be anti-intellectual to be most effective, as to reach a mass of individuals the ideas and calls to action have to appeal to an average or lowest common denominator, and also where a skillful propagandist will utilise the effect of the group mind to conform subconsciously to this base level of discernment.

*"To be effective, propaganda must constantly short-circuit all thought and decision. It must operate on the individual at the level of the unconscious."*

Ellul even argues that much of modern living at the time of his writing has been geared to encourage the separation between reflection and response, to the point where humans are becoming reactionary automatons.

*"We are living in a time when systematically - though without our wanting it so - action and thought are being separated. In our society, he who thinks can no longer act for himself; he must act through the agency of others, and in many cases he cannot act at all. He who acts first cannot think out his action, either because of lack of time and the burden of his personal problems, or because society's plan demands that he translate others' thoughts into action. And we see the same division within the individual himself. ...*

*... Of course it does not cancel out personality; it leaves man complete freedom of thought, except in his political or social action where we find him channeled and engaged in actions that do not necessarily conform to his private beliefs. He even can have political convictions, and still be led to act in a manner apparently contradictory to them. Thus the twists and turns of skillful propaganda do not present insurmountable difficulties. The propagandist can mobilize man for action that is not in accord with his previous convictions."*

An interesting observation also made is that the more an individual is exposed to current affairs in the news, and the more one tries to keep up with the cycle of it, the more susceptible one becomes to the negative influence of propaganda. One could argue topically, that the disconnection from reality to which Ellul refers, in regard to keeping up with current affairs, has become more pronounced with the ever present "now" of immersive 24-hour television news and online news sources.

*"Because he is immersed in current affairs, this man has a psychological weakness that puts him at the mercy of the propagandist. ...*

*... For propaganda can suggest, in the context of news, a group of 'facts' which becomes actuality for a man who feels personally concerned. Propaganda can then exploit his concern for its own purposes."*

In fact, it is even suggested, the purveyors of mass media even count on such a factor, as propaganda generally has a limited shelf life, a characteristic it shares with the news.

*"Propaganda in its explicit form must relate solely to what is timely. Man can be captured and mobilized only if there is consonance between his own deep social beliefs and those underlying the propaganda directed at him, and he will be aroused and moved to action only if the propaganda pushes him toward a timely action."*

Ellul draws attention to the limited capabilities of most individuals in remembering and retaining specific facts relating to a topic or issue, and how the propagandist can elicit a generalised opinion or reaction to a current event by overloading news stories with statistics, figures and facts. In effect the group intellect of a target audience can be lessened in this manner, making each individual comprising a target group easier to manipulate into a conforming and more pliable whole.

*"Man remembers no specific news. He retains only a general impression (which propaganda furnishes him) inserted in the collective current of society. This obviously facilitates the work of the propagandist and permits extraordinary contradictions. ...*

*... this is indeed what the propagandist ultimately seeks, for the individual will never begin to act on the basis of facts, or engage in purely rational behaviour. What makes him act is the emotional pressure, the vision of a future, the myth. The problem is to create an irrational response on the basis of rational and factual elements."*

Ellul asserts that intellectuals are more likely to fall victim to propaganda, as like the news consumer, they are overly confident in their ability to spot and ignore its effects. Conversely this is usually when an individual lowers their guard to a perceived threat, and of

course this is when a threat that operates at the perceptual level is at its most effective. Ellul states that this susceptibility to propaganda amongst intellectuals is strongest with forms of integration propaganda, whilst the general public is more susceptible to agitation propaganda.

*"... a final aspect of integration propaganda: the more comfortable, cultivated, and informed the milieu to which it is addressed, the better it works. Intellectuals are more sensitive than peasants to integration propaganda. In fact, they share the stereotypes of a society even when they are political opponents of the society."*

Propaganda seems to be so effective due to its ability to operate simultaneously at the individual level and on a larger collective. Ellul emphasises that orchestrated propaganda campaigns tend to be formulated and disseminated by large organisations such as governments or corporations.

*"If the action obtained by propaganda is to be appropriate, it cannot be individual; it must be collective. Propaganda has meaning only when it obtains convergence, coexistence of a multiplicity of individual action-reflexes whose coordination can be achieved only through the intermediary of an organization."*

The difference between advertising and propaganda, whilst both seem to operate on similar principles, is that the former is usually selling a particular product or lifestyle to associate with a product, most forms of propaganda are selling an ideology or a political idea endemic of a larger ideology. As I have outlined in my analysis of advertising and the work public relations guru [Edward Bernays](#), both methods of perception management have symbiotically learnt a great deal from each other.

Propaganda has to work with a large degree of the truth, otherwise its veil of manipulative mystique becomes obvious, and the campaigns collective influence fails. The common misconception that the technique works on outright falsehood is myopic, propaganda in a sense works like an aphorism, in that it condenses a complex truth for public acceptance. The author observes that the propagandist can utilise accepted facts and imbue them with a strong moral or emotional element, in order for them to spark the desired action from the target audience.

*"Because political problems are difficult and often confusing, and*



*their significance and their import not obvious, the propagandist can easily present them in **moral** language - and here we leave the realm of fact, to enter into that of passion. Facts, then come to be discussed in the language of **indignation**, a tone which is almost always the mark of propaganda."*

The political discourse of era, or the distinct lack of it, on highly charged topics-of-the-moment, particularly surrounding the umbrella of the social justice movement, seems to thrive on the "*language of indignation*". The variety of platforms and methods of dissemination available to activists from all sides of the political spectrum, particularly in developed countries has made for a highly volatile collective mentality, increasingly weighed down by conflicting propaganda.

*"Propaganda by its very nature is an enterprise for perverting the significance of events and of insinuating false intentions. ...*

*... Everything can serve as a means of propaganda and everything must be utilized."*

Ellul makes propagandas versatility readily apparent, but ultimately he indicates that it is concerned with the transmission of carefully crafted information, calculated as to how it is to be received, with the intention of provoking a specific reaction to obtain a political objective.

*"Modern man needs a relation to facts, a self-justification to convince himself that by acting in a certain way he is obeying reason and proved experience. We must therefore study the close relationship between information and propaganda. Propaganda's content increasingly resembles information. It has even clearly been proved that a violent, excessive, shock-provoking propaganda text leads ultimately to less conviction and participation than does a more "informative" and reasonable text on the same subject. A large dose of fear precipitates immediate action; a reasonably small dose produces lasting support. The listener's critical powers decrease if the propaganda message is more rational and less violent. ..."*

And thus, in our age so dominated by information and its continual ebb and flow, one can find oneself boxed in, with very little self-critical reflection as to what is true or false. The trend at the moment is to blame powerful individuals for manipulating our thoughts, but a far greater aspect is the willingness of the greater public to entrap

themselves.

*"The more the techniques of distributing information develop, the more the individual is shaped by such information. It is not true that he can choose freely with regard to what is presented to him as the truth. And because rational propaganda thus creates an irrational situation, it remains, above all, propaganda - that is, an inner control over the individual by a social force, which means that it deprives him of himself."*

As a psychological phenomenon, Propaganda's nature has been shaped by historical events, circumstances and advances in technology by which information is transmitted. Contextual factors such as these, as well as political, ideological and cultural factors have defined the effective use of the many varying, yet overlapping forms of Propaganda that Ellul elucidates in the first chapter of his book. In many cases Propaganda becomes accepted as central to the doctrinal concerns of a particular society.

*"It is clear that a particular doctrine can make propaganda the very center of political life, the essence of political action, rather than merely an accessory or an incidental and rather suspect instrument.*

...

*... The over-all sociological conditions in a society must provide a favorable environment for propaganda to succeed."*

Propaganda owes much of its evolutionary success to the research on mass and individual manipulation extracted from various fields of sociology and psychology. After all, the human being and the workings of its mind, has spawned one of the most extensive fields of research ever undertaken, and it is often observed that there is still much to learn about human nature. Propaganda will naturally stand to profit from such continuing analysis of the human condition.

For Propaganda to maintain an effective presence in the mind of a society, Ellul observes that it must have a balance between the combined qualities of being an individualist and a mass society. In his analysis, the author outlines the symbiosis at play between the two.

The main factor that has to be overcome for the influence of propaganda to work, is organic local groupings, such as family, religious groupings, or communities with a common belief system.

*"An individual can be influenced by forces such as propaganda only when he is cut off from membership in local groups. Because such groups are organic and have a well-structured material, spiritual, and emotional life, they are not easily penetrated by propaganda."*

What is sought by propagandists is to isolate individuals from traditional groupings, and ways of life, and to replace them with new groupings that allow for individuals to remain atomised, and self-victimised with the burden of crushing responsibility, thus finding themselves firmly under the mass influence of these new groupings. One could rationally argue that this process is at play in Western societies today, as emergent ideological modes of thought, such as various forms of identity politics, attempt to subvert the existing order with their new propaganda myths and calls for privileged status.

*"Thus the masses in contemporary society have made propaganda possible; in fact propaganda can act only where man's psychology is influenced by the crowd or mass to which he belongs. Besides, as we have already pointed out, the means of disseminating propaganda depend on the existence of the masses; in the United States these means are called the mass media of communications with good reason: without the mass to receive propaganda and carry it along, propaganda is impossible."*

For propaganda to retain its effectiveness relies upon a high population density, and urban concentration, where a large frequency of diverse opinions and experiences combine to give a feeling of "togetherness", and give this atomised mass a prescribed sociological and psychological character. The further glue that can cement this bond, is the use of mass media, which can only be effective if the whole society has access to it. Of interest on this point is the author's reference to the use of media monopoly to further propaganda, and that media audiences are complicit in this through willing participation.

*"Only through concentration in a few hands of a large number of media can one attain a true orchestration, a continuity, and an application of scientific methods of influencing individuals. A state monopoly, or a private monopoly is equally effective."*

As Propaganda relies on a readily established vein of public opinion, another prerequisite for its easy dissemination in a society, is a high level of integration attained through education, and a heavy

contextualisation of information to support it. This unified context brings conformity of thought and action amongst the individuals in a society.

*"Through information, the individual is placed in a context and learns to understand the reality of his own situation with respect to society as a whole. This will then entice him to social and political action. ...*

*... Thus information prepares the ground for propaganda. To the extent that a large number of individuals receive the same information, their reactions will be similar."*

For this reason, isolated communities of individuals, with a low living standard, who are removed from the centre of a civilisation are harder to propagandise than individuals living in metropolitan areas.

*"For propaganda to be effective, the propagandee must have a certain store of ideas and a number of conditioned reflexes. These are acquired only with a little affluence, some education, and peace of mind springing from relative security."*

So a degree of normalcy and stability in an individuals' life, and in groupings of individuals leads them to be more ripe for propaganda. In distinguishing classes at this juncture, one could argue that this describes an affluent and healthy middle class, which is usually the primary target of most forms of propaganda campaigns. Ellul also observes that propagandists need to be in touch with the thought patterns of the average person, and so are more likely to come from the middle class than the upper or working classes.

The author also argues that the refinement of cultural influences, such as education and communication, inevitably lends a society to be predisposed to propaganda, as it absorbs culture in all its aspects. In a sense, culture is the province of the cult.

*"When film and novel, newspaper and television are instruments either of political propaganda in the restricted sense or in that of human relations (social propaganda), culture is perfectly integrated into propaganda; as a consequence, the more cultivated a man is, the more he is propagandized. Here one can also see the idealist illusion of those who hope that the mass media of communication will create a mass culture. This "culture" is merely a way of destroying a personality."*

The author overtly posits a viewpoint that runs counter to most people's ideas of propaganda, that the propagandee is complicit in the process, and has a desire to be propagandised. Ellul elucidates that this desire is borne from the decision to comply with group norms to integrate and participate within a society. This opposes the classic take on propaganda as a process of pure victimisation, where an active, authoritarian regime hoodwinks an unwitting, passive public into accepting its will with little choice.

*"The propagandee is by no means just an innocent victim. He provokes the psychological action of propaganda, and not merely lends himself to it, but even derives satisfaction from it. Without this previous, implicit consent, without this need for propaganda experienced by practically every citizen of the technological age, propaganda could not spread."*

The symbiosis between the need of regimes to make propaganda and the need of the population to respond to it has been instrumental in the development and sophistication of propaganda as a sociological phenomenon.

Ellul justifies the use of propaganda as symptomatic of individuals' needs to fulfil their innate desire for political engagement. This need for gratification stems ultimately from a refusal to face the reality that the general public are not qualified or privy to enough relevant and specific information to warrant serious contributions towards how they are governed.

*"The majority prefers expressing stupidities to not expressing any opinion: this gives them the feeling of participation."*

This is where propaganda comes in, it tells people what they should be paying attention to, and gives them the opinion and talking points as to how they should feel. As a result the public feels engaged in the political process, and confident in those who they vote for to lead them.

*"As most people have the desire and at the same time the incapacity to participate, they are ready to accept a propaganda that will permit them to participate, and which hides their incapacity behind explanations, judgements, and news, enabling them to satisfy their desire without eliminating their incompetence. The more complex, general, and accelerated political and economic phenomena become, the more do individuals feel concerned, the more do they*

*want to be involved. In a certain sense this is democracy's gain, but it also leads to more propaganda."*

Propaganda also provides a comforting ideological veil to help individuals cope with the unpleasant truth that it is almost impossible to keep entirely up to date with developments in economics and politics. In a sense, Ellul argues that propaganda helps alleviate the descent into overwhelmed despair that frequently accompanies immersion in the information age.

*"Just as information is necessary for awareness, propaganda is necessary to prevent this awareness from being desperate."*

He also argues that another role of propaganda is to provide an individual with a psychological reason for enjoying the captivation of work.

*"One cannot get good, steady work out of a man merely by pointing to the need for such work, or even its monetary rewards. One must give him psychological satisfactions of a higher order; man wants a profound and significant reason for what he does. And as all this is a collective situation, it will be furnished by collective means."*

The masses have an overwhelming need to be given explanations and values, in order to make sense of the world around them, and also to cohesively fit together in communities. In addition to dispelling anxieties of impersonalised isolation that fragmented technological life inevitably generates, Propaganda can also sanction hatred and frustration to carefully selected variations on the idea of the '[great other](#)', that most successful state apparatuses need to maintain internal order. In the place of religion, Propaganda can provide the comfort, security and self-justification that congeals a society of individuals together.

*"Effective propaganda needs to give man an all-embracing view of the world, a view rather than a doctrine."*