Techniques of Propaganda & Persuasion

◆ And 11 Techniques of Propaganda - PowerPoint CD

◆ By Magedah E. Shabo

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What you get

Part I of the book features eleven chapters on techniques of propaganda. Each deals with a single technique. Part II deals with applications. There are discussion topics in each chapter and activities in the back you can use with a class or on your own. The CD contains an extensive PowerPoint presentation that covers all of the techniques in detail with colorful illustrations. Both allow you understand how propaganda is used to manipulate people and how to avoid being duped yourself. Go to Prestwickhouse.com for pricing and a look at other titles by Shabo.

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What I left out

The book and the CD contain abundant examples and illustrations. They provide a rich history of how propaganda has been used for good, benign, and negative purposes over the years. This summary is a good start, but I strongly recommend you add this book to your library. Every social studies classroom should have at least one copy. Even though I have encountered most of this content before, reading it has sharpened my ability to protect myself from those seeking to manipulate my thinking.

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What is propaganda?

Propaganda is always manipulative. It is intended to give someone else control over your thoughts and actions. This is why it is crucial the you be able to know it when you see it so you can make rational, conscious decisions. It comes in many forms, but you can recognize it by its persuasive function, sizable target audience, the representation of a specific group’s agenda, and the use of faulty reasoning and/or emotional appeals. It is not always harmful. In some situations it can be benign or even positive.
Assertion

 Assertion consists of simply stating a debatable idea as a fact. It relies on the premise that people like to believe what they are told. Examples include: “Women are bad drivers,” and “Men never stop to ask for directions.” Assertions are also common in advertising claims. Sometimes facts are fabricated to support a claim.
Bandwagon

The “bandwagon effect” refers to any situation in which people attempt to be part of a successful or popular endeavor merely for the sake of its popularity. Peer pressure can come into play if “everyone else is doing it.” The problem is that you do not know how other people made their decision. It may be that everyone is simply going along with what is popular. It is a natural human desire to want to be part of a majority group or a winning team.
Card Stacking

This is where an unfair advantage is given to one point of view, while weakening another. Information may be presented out of context and important facts can be obscured. Even if alternate views are presented, they tend to be presented last and with less skill. Censorship is an extreme form. (Doug: You see this in politics a lot. The way opposite sides present their arguments on current tax legislation is a good example.)
These are colorful vague terms that are meant to appeal to the audience. They are often left to stand alone without context or definition. The idea is to gain unquestioning approval of whatever is said. They are common in political campaigns and advertising. Look for vague, positive words that are not explained. (Doug: Hope and change were often used in the last presidential campaign.)
False Dilema

Also known as false choice, it involves reducing a complex argument to a small number of alternatives and concluding that only one option is appropriate. “Either you agree with us, or you are a fool.” In the real world most issues are not so simple. (Doug: The Democrats might tell you that if we don’t raise taxes on the rich, the government will go broke. The Republicans might say that if we raise taxes on the rich, there will be fewer jobs.)
The lesser of two evils

This is a type of false dilemma that offers two “bad” alternatives. Here the propagandist is trying to get you to adopt a perspective you would be hesitant to accept. To do so, an even worse alternative is offered as the only option. The imperfect option is better than a horrendous one. (Doug: In an environment where all politicians have low approval rates, you might be asked to vote for someone who isn’t as bad as the alternative.)

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Name Calling

Name-calling is the use of negative words to disparage an enemy or an opposing view. Insulting words take the place of logical agreements, appealing to emotions, rather than reason. This is the opposite of glittering generalities. (Doug: Politicians on both sides use the word extremist to describe someone who simply disagrees with them. Republicans use the term socialist to describe people on the left, while democrats like to accuse republicans of trying to give more money to billionaires as if being one is bad.)
Problems rarely stem from a single cause, but propagandists often oversimplify. When an enemy is blamed for something that is someone else’s fault, it is a form of this technique known as scapegoating. The Nazi’s blamed the Jews for Germany’s economic problems prior to World War II. Even if the target is responsible for part of the problem, they are probably not the sole cause. (Doug: Both parties blame each other for recent economic problems.)
Plain Folk

Here the propagandist tries to paint himself as just like you. Problems are blamed on outsiders. The risk is that the person using this technique is exposed as an impostor. Politicians often paint themselves as plain folk rather than Washington insiders. (Doug: Politicians on both sides claim to be in touch with the grass roots or the blue collar crowd. They want you to think they support Main Street rather than Wall Street.)
Testimonials

Most testimonials are made by famous people who tell us how much they like a product or a politician. The propagandist hopes that your feelings about the famous person will transfer to the product or cause he or she endorses. In addition to celebrity testimonials, politicians use “plain folk” testimonials where someone like you tells you why you should vote for someone. Some testimonials are not propaganda. An expert opinion from someone who does not gain financially is an example. Keep in mind that you need faulty reasoning in order to have propaganda.
Transfer

- This is a subtle technique also known as association or false connection. It is often done in a symbolic manner. If you pose with the American flag you are sending the message that you are a patriot. Such use of symbols only becomes propaganda when symbols are used to send an unspoken emotional message. (Doug: Politicians will picture an opponent with someone who they think is less popular. In more liberal districts, democrats will try to associate opponents with Rush Limbaugh. Republicans often try to connect their opponents with Nancy Pelosi from the liberal hotbed of San Francisco.)

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Desires and Fears

Most actions are motivated by desires and fears, and a skilled propagandist can use either against you. Many fears and desires are two sides of the same coin. We desire love and fear rejection. Many ads imply romance will follow if you use their product. Others imply that the product will prevent rejection. We desire prosperity and control, and fear being powerless and lacking material wealth. We desire immortality and fear death. (Doug: People put up with invasive searches at airports due to fear of terrorists. Attractive celebrities do ads for products designed to help you live longer.)

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Positive Uses

While the word has negative connotations, propaganda can be used for good. It can be used to end slavery, promote peace, or encourage people to improve the world or their local community. It can be used to encourage and inspire. It can also engender sympathy and generosity and promote civic minded behavior. Some people disapprove of using propaganda in this manner, while others believe that the ends justify the means.
Negative Uses

Negative propaganda often promotes fear and hostility. Propaganda that promotes fear, leaves people open to further propaganda. Such fear is often disproportionate to the actual danger. Anger is closely related and used to much the same effect. It is a common reaction to injustice, humiliation, or betrayal. It shuts down rational thought. Hatred is like fear in that it is a powerful motivator of human emotions. Negative feelings can be used to promote discrimination, violence, and property violation. They can also be used to dehumanize and violate human rights. At the opposite end, they can deify.