



RECOGNIZING PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES

Propaganda appears in a variety of forms but four common techniques make it easy to spot.

TECHNIQUE 1: Activate Strong Emotions

Propaganda plays on human emotions—fear, hope, anger, frustration, sympathy—to direct audiences toward the desired goal. In the deepest sense, propaganda is a mind game—the skillful propagandist exploits people’s fears and prejudices. Successful propagandists understand how to psychologically tailor messages to people’s emotions in order to create a sense of excitement and arousal that suppresses critical thinking. By activating emotions, the recipient is emotionally moved by the message of the propagandist. What emotions are important for those who create propaganda? Fear, pity, anger, arousal, compassion, hatred, resentment—all these emotions can be intensified by using carefully selected labels.

TECHNIQUE 2: Simplify Information & Ideas

Propaganda may use accurate and truthful information, or half-truths, opinions, lies and falsehoods. Successful propaganda tells simple stories that are familiar and trusted, often using metaphors, imagery, and repetition to make them seem natural or "true." Oversimplification is a way of describing things using catchy and memorable short phrases that become a substitute for critical thinking. Oversimplifying information does not contribute to knowledge or understanding, but because our brains naturally seek to reduce complexity, this form of propaganda can be effective.

TECHNIQUE 3: Respond to Audience Needs & Values

Effective propaganda conveys messages, themes, and language that appeals directly, and many times exclusively, to specific and distinct groups within a population. Propagandists may appeal to you as a member of a family or by using your beliefs and values, racial or ethnic identity, your personal aspirations and hopes for the future, or even your hobbies or favorite celebrities to influence you. Sometimes, universal values are activated, as when our deepest human values—the need to love and be loved, to feel a sense of belonging and a sense of place—are activated by propaganda. By creating messages that appeal directly to the needs, hopes, and fears of specific groups, propaganda becomes personal and relevant. When messages are personally relevant, people pay attention and absorb key information and ideas.

TECHNIQUE 4: Attack Opponents

Propaganda can serve as a form of political and social warfare by identifying and vilifying opponents. It can call into question the legitimacy, credibility, accuracy, and even the character of one’s opponents and their ideas. Propaganda can also be used to exclude specific groups of people, incite hatred, or cultivate indifference. Because people are naturally attracted to conflict, a propagandist can make strategic use of controversy to get attention. Attacking opponents also encourages "either-or" or "us-them" thinking which suppresses the consideration of more complex information and ideas.