

# 8 Frightening Characteristics of Propaganda

Jacques Ellul's *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1965) has been called "a far more frightening work than any of the nightmare novels of George Orwell." In it, the French philosopher and sociologist dispels some of the popular notions about propaganda and exposes how it really operates in the modern world.

In the first chapter of the book, Ellul describes some of the characteristics of modern propaganda. Eight of them appear below:

## 1) It Prevents Dialogue.

"To be effective, propaganda cannot be concerned with detail... Propaganda ceases where simple dialogue begins... it does not tolerate discussion; by its very nature, it excludes contradiction and discussion."

## 2) It Focuses on the Mass

"For propaganda to address itself to the individual, in his isolation, apart from the crowd, is impossible. The individual is of no interest to the propagandist; as an isolated unit he presents too much resistance to external action... The most favorable moment to seize a man and influence him is when he is alone in the mass: it is at this point that propaganda can be most effective."

## 3) It is "Total"

"Propaganda must be total. The propagandist must utilize all

of the technical means at his disposal – the press, radio, TV, movies, posters, meetings, door-to-door canvassing. Modern propaganda must utilize *all* of these media. There is no propaganda as long as one makes use, in sporadic fashion and at random, of a newspaper article here, a poster or a radio program there, organizes a few meetings and lectures, writes a few slogans on walls; that is not propaganda.”

#### **4) It Takes Over Education**

“Education and training are inevitably taken over, as the Napoleonic Empire demonstrated for the first time. No contrast can be tolerated between teaching and propaganda, between the critical spirit formed by higher education and the exclusion of independent thought. One must utilize the education of the young to condition them to what comes later.”

#### **5) It Takes Over Literature and History**

“Propaganda will take over literature (present *and* past) and history, which must be rewritten according to propaganda’s needs.”

#### **6) It Must be Subtle at First**

“Direct propaganda, aimed at modifying opinions and attitudes, must be preceded by propaganda that is sociological in character, slow, general, seeking to create a climate, an atmosphere of favorable preliminary attitudes... The ground must be sociologically prepared before one can proceed to direct prompting.”

## **7) It Must be Nonstop**

“[Propaganda] must fill the citizen’s whole day and all his days... Propaganda tends to make the individual live in a separate world; he must not have outside points of reference... successful propaganda will occupy every moment of the individual’s life: through posters and loudspeakers when he is out walking, through radio and newspapers at home, through meetings and movies in the evening. The individual must not be allowed to recover, to collect himself, to remain untouched by propaganda during any relatively long period... It is based on slow, constant impregnation.”

## **8) It Aims at Irrational Action**

“The aim of modern propaganda is no longer to modify ideas, but to provoke action. It is no longer to change adherence to a doctrine, but to make the individual cling irrationally to a process of action. It is no longer to lead to a choice, but to loosen the reflexes. It is no longer to transform an opinion, but to arouse an active and mythical belief.”

Does this sound like anyone’s playbook today?