

4 Ways to Avoid Being Fooled By Propaganda

We live in a society where propaganda is hurled at us nearly every waking hour. One need only recall the last election to verify that such a statement is true.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of the public is ill-equipped to deal with this propaganda. This is because, as former University of Chicago professor Richard Weaver [once explained](#), “coping with propaganda requires a widespread critical intelligence, which is largely the product of education.” If such was the case when Weaver uttered this statement in the 1950s, one can only imagine how much more true it is today.

The way to avoid being duped by propaganda is to understand the art of rhetoric and persuasion. According to Weaver, propaganda results when the art of persuasion is subtly twisted and used to deceive instead of promote truth. There are four main ways in which this is done:

1. Name-Calling

According to Weaver the first way to avoid the propaganda vortex is to examine how an idea, individual, or issue is defined:

“One of the commonest tricks of the propagandist in any age is name-calling. If he desires us to accept something, he applies a good name to it; if he desires us to reject it he applies an evil one. ... If the name given is a true one, then the definition is correct and the argument honest. But the propagandist applies a name which is speciously good. That is to say, it looks good to the uncritical, but actually is not.”

2. Careless Cause-and-Effect

The second form of propaganda perverts the use of cause-and-effect. As Weaver implies, making a point by showing how an effect is the outcome of several causes is difficult, but can be done. However, the red flag of propaganda should go up when an individual insists that an effect is the result of one and only one cause, without any qualifications.

3. False Analogy

The third form of propaganda occurs when individuals try to compare apples to oranges. According to Weaver:

“These arguments based on seeming rather than real similarities. As soon as you begin to examine the points of correspondence, you find that the differences are more numerous or more important than the likenesses. Therefore the two things being compared are different in a more fundamental way than they are alike, and different things ought to be done with respect to them.”

4. Wrong Appeal to Authority

Weaver notes that the fourth form of propaganda occurs when an individual incorrectly uses an authority to lend credibility to his argument. The respect people have for these authorities causes them to let down their guard and fail to recognize errors in reasoning:

“Neither politicians nor advertisers are above trying to get people on their side by borrowing phrases and other stylistic elements from authoritative documents. The ethical question here involves whether the audience realizes the kind of pressure that is being brought to bear on it.”

As the astute observer may have realized, these four forms of propaganda are in essence common logical fallacies. Instruction in logic was once par for the course in the nation's schools, but its presence has largely disappeared from education in recent years. Would we increase the critical intelligence of the nation and diminish the sway of propaganda if we brought logic instruction back to the classroom?

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