

# Propaganda: 4 Tips to Fight It

Edward Bernays, considered by many to be the father of modern propaganda, opens his famous book *Propaganda* by stating:

*We are governed, our minds molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.*

Of those men “we have never heard of”, Bernays writes:

*“Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country...*

*”*

*‘There is consequently a vast and continuous effort going on to capture our minds in the interest of some policy or commodity or idea.’*

For individuals for whom those statements ring true, especially today, consider that Edward Bernays wrote all of that in 1928 *and* that he thought propaganda was not only necessary in a democratic society, but in many ways a good thing.

Jacques Ellul, a noted political philosopher who wrote *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (1965), had the opposite opinion of propaganda. He studied it not to become a propagandist, but rather “to bring contemporary man a step closer to an awareness of propaganda – the very phenomenon that conditions and regulates him.”

Disturbingly, both men confirmed the totality of propaganda in our society. And they did that many, many decades ago and well before the internet, social media, cable TV, or data mining.

By 2017, many generations have been raised from infancy immersed in corporate, political, and ideological propaganda. Your grandparents were victims of propaganda, your parents were victims of propaganda, and you are, without a doubt, a victim of propaganda.

Instead of embracing propaganda like Bernays, Ellul wrote about the topic in order to help men free themselves of it. He saw propaganda as a clear and present danger to the dignity and well-being of the individual, with logical and troubling ramifications for society, government, and even the institution of democracy.

*"The force of propaganda is a direct attack against man. The question is to determine how great is the danger ... Personally, I, too, tend to believe in the pre-eminence of man and, consequently, in his invincibility. Nevertheless, as I observe the facts, I realize man is terribly malleable, uncertain of himself, ready to accept and to follow many suggestions, and is tossed about by all the winds of doctrine...*

*...to warn [man] of his weakness is not to attempt to destroy him, but rather to encourage him to strengthen himself. I have no sympathy with the haughty aristocratic intellectual who judges from on high believing himself invulnerable to the destructive forces of his time, and disdainfully considers the common people as cattle to be manipulated, to be molded by the action of propaganda in the most intimate aspects of their being. I insist that to give such warning is an act in the defense of man, that I am not judging propaganda with Olympian detachment, and that having suffered, felt, and analyzed the impact of the power of propaganda on myself, having been time and again, and still being, the object of propaganda, I want to speak of it as a menace which threatens the total personality."*

Like Ellul, we have suffered from propaganda on every

communication platform and in all its forms, whether blatant or subtle. It can be found in video games, movies, books, newspapers, schools, TV shows, billboards, Facebook, Twitter, and even government or institutional documents that you are required to read and sign. It is truly all-encompassing in our technological, socially networked world.

Being warned of its presence, how then do we personally fight it?

1. **Know Your Enemy** – Study history and, especially, ideologies like [socialism](#), [globalism](#), [relativism](#), [fascism](#), etc. that are active today. Only if you know what ideologues believe and what they want to achieve, can you start to identify their work. You should also know their tools, so read about propaganda.
2. **Look for Patterns** – If you're following the news or aware of current issues or ideological efforts, watch for patterns across all media platforms. For instance, if immigration reform is being debated, and the media seem very much against said reforms, and then you watch an episode of a TV show that portrays arresting an illegal immigrant (or undocumented worker) as a really mean thing to do or suddenly there are a lot of stories about illegal immigrants that tug at your heartstrings, understand that they are most likely related. That's just one example, but you can find them with great regularity if you're watching for patterns. Remember, some propaganda is in your face while other propaganda is very subtle. Furthermore, propaganda doesn't work as a "one-off" effort, it is continuous and coming at you from many directions.
3. **Check your Emotions** – When you read a headline, watch a video (especially on social media), or look at a picture accompanied by a message, step away and ask yourself how it made you feel. Did you react with pity, guilt, anger? If you did, why and to what was it directed? As you

contemplate those questions, also consider what would happen if you followed your feelings on an issue (or even a product) and who would benefit.

4. **Turn Off the TV, Quit Facebook** – Video and imagery are powerful tools of propaganda that condition us to accept, desire, or even hate. When we are “plugged-in” 24/7, we are handing ourselves over to the propagandists. Understandably, it’s hard to completely pull the plug and sometimes the web helps you understand what’s happening, but if you are able to set aside as much time for quiet contemplation and healthy, media-free activities, you will be far less a victim of propaganda. And, yes, I get the irony of distributing this article through the web.

Those four tips are admittedly modest when it comes to fighting propaganda, but the sooner we realize that we are already the victims of propaganda, that the world we live in is a creation of numerous propaganda efforts, and that the same efforts are waged against us continuously, the sooner we can push back and restore the dignity of the individual.