

Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion

By Randal Marlin

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A Book Review by

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If you ever think of propaganda as an exclusive feature of the past century's two world wars and Cold War politics, Randal Marlin's (2013) *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion* would most likely make you re-think your position. This book provides stimulating and compelling discussions of propaganda as a pervasive feature of our 21st century communication not only in politics, but also in advertising and public relations. Marlin—a Canadian philosophy professor at Carleton University—offers a comprehensive and insightful analysis of propaganda based on multi-disciplinary perspectives and theories as well as on historical practices dealing with this phenomenon. Throughout the book, Marlin's underlying thesis is that for us to build the defenses against the evil aspects of propaganda, we first need to understand its complexities, contexts, techniques, and tools of analysis.

Though *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion* may look too complicated for average readers intrigued by the illusive faces of propaganda, I find the work's lucid and cogent text to be critically helpful for understanding this evolving phenomenon as a basic feature of human persuasive communication. Marlin spares no effort to define propaganda in different historical eras and to demonstrate its functions and potential outcomes in ethical and socio-political contexts. I think the author has done such an excellent job in developing a sophisticated account of propaganda and its intriguing history. The book chronicles propaganda from ancient classical Greek theories of rhetoric and persuasion, through the Christian era, the rise of the nation-state, World War I, Nazism, and Communism to 21st century transnational public diplomacy, online media, and market communication. For students and researchers interested in understanding the concept of propaganda and its ethical implications, the book is a gold mine of historical anecdotes, philosophical insights, leading personalities, regulatory standards, and case studies. Readers come across names like Pisistratus, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustus, Machiavelli, Napoleon, Wellington House, the Department of Information, Ivy Lee Leninist propaganda, Mein Kampf, Goebbels, the Hutchins Commission, and the Canadian press council—all of whom have left enduring marks on today's persuasive communication and techniques.

The author suggests that propaganda is here to stay and all that we can do is to cope with its negative consequences. Throughout the book, Marlin seems deeply cognizant of the fact that propaganda may be unavoidable in our life as long as there are nations that seek domination and

hegemony. His vision about propaganda throughout the book is that of a malignant form of persuasion. The fact that propaganda seeks to bypass or even suppress our ability to assess rationally and on a factually adequate basis whatever being communicated, suggests a deeply disturbing unethical facet of this phenomenon. Readers will find many explicit and implicit references to propagandists as the “bad guys” who should be confronted by individuals and nations to preserve the sound ethical communication standards that drive human sustainability around the world. Marlin notes that “to avoid repeating mistakes of the past, an alert citizenry today should take the trouble to learn how easy it can be for a powerful minority to manipulate information to win the support—or the indifference—of the majority towards its actions” (2013: 2).

Readers affiliated with diverse disciplinary backgrounds should find the book quite informative. The lucid language and diverse examples and cases suggest that this work is meant not only for average mass communication students and researchers, but also for learners with training in politics, sociology, psychology, public diplomacy, marketing, anthropology, literature, history, and philosophy. Marlin explicates the multiple meanings of propaganda and the insidious elements of communication forms like advertising, public relations, and government information in a critical, yet balanced fashion. He gives ample attention to discussing ethical implications of those forms, positioning them in the context of freedom of expression, democratization, and universal ethics.

According to *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, handling communication in diverse personal and institutional contexts is most challenging. The book provides diverse examples of propaganda undermining understanding and harmony among cultures and nations. Marlin refers to deceptive and misleading persuasive communications as a means of achieving political and social ends with minimal regard for ethical standards. However, according to the author, some forms of propaganda, like education, may be viewed as having significant benign features. While education is culturally biased by default, the dividend of preparing young generations with culturally acceptable ethical values has always been positively received.

The book provides an insightful account not only of the multiple facets of propaganda in human history, but of how numerous forms of persuasion had disastrous consequences for some nations, ethnic groups, and cultures. He suggests that the Holocaust was an outcome of systematic Nazi hate propaganda and so was the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis in Rwanda as a result of extensive Hutu radio propaganda. Marlin also presented examples from the Middle East during the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq when former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell did his “visually seductive” 2003 UN Security Council presentation claiming Iraqi possession of biological and chemical weapons. Media were willing to accept and report Powell’s claims as facts, thus fostering a misinformed world public opinion on Iraq. As it turned out later, Iraq had no such weapons and the whole story was fabricated to justify the invasion of another country.

Marlin raises interesting questions about the efficacy of government controls on mass communications as opposed to self-regulatory mechanisms in the media industry. He addresses issues like advertising controls, press councils, and government communication in American and Canadian contexts. He notes that hate propaganda has been at the centre of constitutional debates in Canada, citing cases like that of Ernst Zundel who denied the Holocaust. He quoted Chief Justice Brian Dickson’s statement that hate propaganda ranked low among the kinds of expression meriting protection when considered in light of the core values that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was designed to uphold. He refers to the Hutchins Commission

in the U.S. and the Kent Commission in Canada and their actions on government approaches to media concentrations.

Marlin sees potential for greater democratized and less propagandistic discourse as dictated by the Web's interactive and engaging communicative features. He sees good prospects in public journalism online and in the Internet's contribution to enhancing democracy. He stresses the role of the Internet in providing opportunities for discussion and dissemination of information outside the range accepted in the mainstream media. However, he also cites examples of skepticism among some scholars like Robert McChesney of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, suggesting that newly developed computer and digital communication technologies can undermine the ability to control communication in a traditionally hierarchical manner.

About the Reviewer

Mohammad Ayish is Professor and Head of the Department of Mass Communication at the American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. He holds a doctoral degree in International Mass Communication from the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities. Dr. Ayish has over 60 articles and book chapters published in Arab and international journals in addition to four books. His most recent co-edited book is: *Explorations in Global Media Ethics* (Routledge, 2012). His research interests focus on new media technologies, social media, women and media, Arab broadcasting, media and cultural identity, and media ethics.

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