

You Are Surrounded by Propaganda. “The Invisible Government”

Part 13 of the 'Elephants in the room' series

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Region: [Europe](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

“The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.”(1)

Propaganda is the distortion of information to manipulate people’s thoughts and actions. Many philosophers over the years have noted “The easiness with which the many are governed by the few.”(2) The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, realised that persuasive speakers can lead their audience into making unwise choices, and therefore believed that the ‘art of influencing opinion’ should be widely taught. Unfortunately in Britain and the US, there is no formal teaching of how powerful people manipulate our opinions.

Propaganda-managed democracy

A democracy works best if decision-making is out in the open and policies can be thoroughly scrutinised, but present-day politicians and corporate leaders operate in secret, and spend a lot of money manipulating our opinions. Most people associate propaganda with dictators, or with historical events such as World War 1 and World War 2. However, propaganda is actually one of the most powerful forces within 21st Century Britain and the US, despite being rarely mentioned by the mainstream press. The overall aim is to control people whilst they think they have freedom of action – this is sometimes called ‘engineering’ or ‘manufacturing’ consent.(3) The more specific goals are to limit the terms of any debate, and to direct our attention away from thinking critically about our military, corporate, economic and political systems.

Propaganda specialists now play an almost continuous behind-the-scenes role. Much of the time, people are not even aware that their views are being manipulated. There is repeated, subliminal reinforcement. What we have ended up with has been labelled a propaganda-managed democracy.(4) People who do this work have stopped using the word propaganda, because of its negative association with war. It is now known as Public Relations (PR). When governments distort information this is colloquially known as spin.

The most powerful source of propaganda is mainstream media – newspapers and TV news and current affairs programs. This was discussed in detail in the two previous posts. However, there are other sources of propaganda. Some of these are discussed below. Others, such as advertising, will be discussed in later posts.

Layer Upon Layer of Propaganda

Where discussions of propaganda do take place, commentators usually talk about individual pictures, newspaper articles, or political speeches, but propaganda is much broader and more complex than that.(5) Many parts of our society contain elements of propaganda, and they can influence our thoughts and our ideas for many years. What starts out as a deliberate attempt to mislead people, gradually becomes the received wisdom if it remains unchallenged. It surrounds us and works in a subconscious way to influence our thoughts about almost every aspect of our societies – how they are structured, which aspects of society get talked about critically, and who benefits. The framework for every important discussion contains unstated assumptions that go unquestioned. This sets the limits for which opinions are considered reasonable, and which are not.

When magazine editors decide who to interview, or a TV producer decides who to have as a guest, they are making decisions, sometimes subconsciously, about which opinions to take seriously, and whom they perceive as knowledgeable. When editors decide whose obituaries will appear in their newspaper, they tend to celebrate establishment figures, reinforcing a message that we should treat them and their views as important. When this happens repeatedly, day after day, year after year, readers and viewers will tend to be influenced by these ideas, and come to share similar views.

For example, if we talk about wealth, there is an unstated assumption that it is ok for some people or organisations to have unlimited wealth. In fact we are bombarded with propaganda, in magazines like Forbes, which is intended to encourage us to celebrate extreme wealth,(6) and even to define success by how wealthy we are. The evidence showing that concentrations of wealth, and extreme inequality, create huge problems for societies is mostly ignored.(7) We are indoctrinated to believe that the rich have ‘earned’ their wealth, or that success is based on merit. Some people who have accumulated great wealth by committing serious crimes, such as Andrew Carnegie or John Rockefeller, set up foundations and give money to good causes as a way of whitewashing their reputations.(8) They make donations to universities or have buildings named after them. As one commentator noted:

“Corporate fraudsters almost all use philanthropy as a cover. Because of all their goodness, people never look any further”(9)

This is all intended to make us less critical of those with great wealth, and therefore less critical of how our society works.

History, as taught in the US and Britain, is Propaganda

Censorship-by-omission, where important issues are not discussed (explained in the previous post) is important with historical propaganda. Our history books have a western perspective, distorting events, exaggerating positives and minimising or ignoring negatives.(10) A great deal of our history is propaganda to whitewash reputations and to celebrate the role of the wealthy and the powerful, and to erase their crimes and exploitation. People such as Winston Churchill are portrayed positively, with no discussion of his extreme, racist approach to killing people in Britain’s colonies. Commentators talk unquestioningly about British and US ‘values’, like ‘freedom’ or ‘democracy’, without mentioning that the values that influence policymaking the most include power, money, war

and exploitation.

I cannot stress this point enough. The positive portrayal of rich and powerful people, both historical and in the present day, and the censorship-by-omission of all their crimes and unethical activities, and the huge amount of damage that their actions have caused to people at home and abroad, is incredibly powerful propaganda.

During recent protests about racism, statues were pulled down in Britain and the US.(11) These statues have played a propaganda role. They are intended to show how important the individuals were, and make us less questioning of our history and of earlier decision-makers. Similarly, many British country houses were built with money that came either directly from the slave trade, or from industries that used slaves, or from compensation given to slave owners when slavery was abolished.(12) The houses were status symbols when they were built, and they now stand as historical monuments to the people who built them. Some churches contain monuments to wealthy donors who helped to pay for the building of the church, with no indication that their wealth came from slavery, or the drug trade, or colonial exploitation. Streets are named after famous people, some of whom committed serious crimes, but their true history is rarely mentioned. This propaganda is remarkably effective and creates what is known as 'collective amnesia'. Whole societies deny their history, and British and American citizens have become remarkably uncritical of their military, corporate, economic and political systems.

Museums do Propaganda

Museums and other exhibitions are an important part of this historical propaganda. The displays at the Imperial War Museum are notoriously distorted, celebrating Britain's history of violence, and misrepresenting what actually happened and why.(13) Medals are celebrated, even if they were awarded for participation in colonial plunder and associated massacres, and the soldiers are presented as heroes. Powerful people involved in aggression and violence clean up their stories. There is an unstated assumption that US and British politicians had good intentions in their foreign policies. But this needs to be stated clearly, questioned and challenged, because the evidence shows that US and British leaders have not had good intentions in their foreign policies. Even a display about propaganda by the British Library in 2013 did not have any discussion about censorship-by-omission.(14)

Think Tanks and Universities do Propaganda

Think tanks claim to be independent research establishments, but they are usually funded by wealthy donors such as billionaires or big corporations, so their output reflects the interests of those donors.(15) Mainstream publishers rarely publish genuinely critical books. Before the financial crisis in 2008, they declined many books that explained the problems with the financial system.(16) Most critical writing is in books published by small publishers, and those books are rarely reviewed in the mainstream press. Universities teach Economics, Finance, Politics, International Relations and War Studies in heavily distorted ways. The majority of academics in these subjects present only a narrow range of mainstream opinions and ignore the most critical views. Critical academics have complained that most academic journals reinforce mainstream thinking by not accepting work that is too critical. This has been particularly notable in economics, where students at many universities have been protesting, since the 2008 financial crisis, that what they are taught is irrelevant to the real world.(17)

People are rewarded for not challenging the system

The honours system in Britain, where awards such as peerages and knighthoods are given out, is notorious for rewarding party fundraisers and political allies,(18) and more generally for rewarding people who have been successful within the establishment system.

The Nobel Peace Prize is given to sociopathic war criminals such as Henry Kissinger and Barack Obama. The prize for economics is awarded to people who have promoted some of the most extreme economic ideas such as Milton Friedman. The economics prize was set up by the Swedish central bank to promote neoliberal (an extreme form of capitalism) ideas,(19) and to make economics seem more scientific than it really is. These awards are mostly given to people who are not strongly critical of how our societies work.

Not everyone is conscious that they spread propaganda

The successful spread of propaganda involves people repeating and passing on distorted information that they were exposed to in the past. Most people are unaware they are doing it. When economics lecturers teach economic theories that end up benefitting the rich, some of them are unaware they are doing so. Some journalists believe the propaganda that they have been exposed to by governments and corporations, so they repeat it. Any time someone repeats something that they have read in a mainstream newspaper, or seen on television news or current affairs programs, there is a high probability that they are repeating propaganda.

The Overton Window - Alternative Views Are Not Discussed

The repetition of some points-of-view is so widespread that these perspectives become the accepted norm, so individuals engage in self-censorship, where they become reluctant to express dissenting views, afraid that they will be considered ridiculous by their friends and colleagues. This becomes reinforcing, so that the acceptable range of views becomes very narrow. This is known as the 'Overton window'.(20) Alternative views are essentially shut down. This desire to conform with others around us is a very powerful psychological trait that will be discussed in a later post.

Resisting propaganda is possible - Seek out alternative views

People with strongly critical opinions rarely appear on discussion programs or in magazines. In 2014, the singer P.J.Harvey was a guest editor on BBC Radio 4's Today program. All of her guests were critical thinkers. This was unique in 21st century BBC broadcasting. Voices and opinions that are rarely heard finally had an opportunity to explain what is really going on.(21)

Most people do not like to admit that they are susceptible to propaganda, therefore they claim it is not there. We are all regularly manipulated. There is no shame in admitting it. We can never change things if we do not admit that people are trying to manipulate us. Understanding the extent of propaganda in Britain and the US is the key to understanding how political and corporate criminals have been able to get away with their activities for so long.

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Rod Driver is a part-time academic who is particularly interested in de-bunking modern-day US and British propaganda. This is the thirteenth in a series entitled *Elephants In The Room*, which attempts to provide a beginners guide to understanding what's really going on in relation to war, terrorism, economics and poverty, without the nonsense in the mainstream media.

Notes

- 1) Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*, 1928
 - 2) David Hume, 1711-1776, cited in Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy*, 2006
 - 3) A similar expression, 'Manufacturing Consent', is the title of a book by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky about the media. This book is discussed more in the posts about the failings of the media.
 - 4) Alex Carey, *Taking The Risk Out Of Democracy*, 1996, p.19
 - 5) Robert Jackall (ed.) *Propaganda (Main trends of the Modern World)*, 1994
 - 6) Forbes, 'World's Billionaires List: The Richest in 2020', at <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/>
 - 7) Karen Rowlingson, 'Does income inequality cause health and social problems', Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Sep 2011, at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/inequality-income-social-problems-full.pdf>
 - 8) Michelle Celarier, 'The 10 most toxic Philanthropists', 24 Sep 2019, at <https://www.worth.com/the-10-most-toxic-philanthropists/>
 - 9) Marianne Jennings, *The seven signs of ethical collapse: How to spot moral meltdowns in companies...before it's too late*, 2006
 - 10) James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, 1996
- Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 2015
- The Crimes of Winston Churchill, at https://medium.com/@write_12958/the-crimes-of-winston-churchill-c5e3ecb229b3
- 11) BBC, 'George Floyd protests: The statues being defaced', 10 June 2020, at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-52963352>
 - 12) Sanchez Manning, 'The stately homes built on the back of slaves', Independent, 3 March 2013, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/the-stately-homes-built-on-the-back-of-slaves-8518002.html>
 - 13) Louis Allday, 'The Imperial War Museum in London: A Lesson in State Propaganda?', Monthly Review online, 7 Sep 2016, at <https://mronline.org/2016/09/07/allday070916.html/#lightbox/11/>

14) Personal Observation by the author on visiting the British Library exhibition entitled 'Propaganda, Power and Persuasion', 2013

15) Tamasin Cave and Andy Rowell, *A Quiet Word: Lobbying, Crony Capitalism and Broken Politics in Britain*, 2014

16) Michael Hudson, *J is for Junk Economics*, 2017

17) Joe Earle, Cahal Moran and Zach Ward-Perkins, *The Econocracy: The perils of leaving economics to the experts*, 2016

18) Andrew Grice, 'David Cameron Honours list would embarrass a medieval; court', Independent, 4 Aug 2016,

at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/honours-list-read-full-david-cameron-peers-knighthoods-mbes-nominations-a7172406.html>

Also see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cash-for-Honours_scandal

19) Avner Offer and Gabriel Soderberg, *The Nobel Factor: The prize in economics, social democracy and the market turn*, 2016

20) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overton_window

21) 'Joyce Macmillan: Why politics deserves a new voice', The Scotsman, 3 Jan 2014,

at <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/joyce-mcmillan-why-politics-deserves-new-voice-1548993>

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