

Media, Persuasion and Propaganda

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Preface

Tricksters at Play

Eshu's cap

This is a book about persuasion, deception and trust and begins with a trickster's journey. We take our lead from Robert Farris Thompson, who eloquently traces the spread of West African culture throughout the diaspora of the New World. He begins by acknowledging the central importance of *orisha* (gods) in carrying African expressive genius – the 'flash of the spirit' – across the Atlantic. When calling on the *orisha* for guidance, West Africans begin with Eshu-Elegbara, a powerful Yoruba and Fon deity endowed with *àshé*, the 'force to make all things happen and multiply' (1983: 18). As with other tricksters, Eshu is sexual, of ambiguous gender and a messenger to the gods about human affairs. Eshu represents chance and uncertainty; where the trickster rules, anything can happen. Eshu creates disorder to test the status quo and keep culture moving along. And Eshu is associated with the crossroads, both as a physical place to offer tribute and symbolically, as a place to speak in riddles and paradoxes, where the mind might go in many different directions searching for answers. At the crossroads, we make decisions about which way to go. We take a risk and learn to trust.

In a West African folktale about Eshu, two men swear vows of eternal friendship without first paying tribute to the god of chance. Eshu decides to test them and fashions a cloth cap with black on one side and white on the other. Wearing this two-coloured cap, Eshu passes along the road between the friends, who are working in neighbouring fields. One of the men insists he sees Eshu wearing a white cap, while the other is certain the god is wearing a black one. The ensuing argument is heated and attracts the attention of their neighbours.

Eshu soon returns, appearing cool and pretending not to know what is happening. When the men explain their disagreement, Eshu declares they are both right:

As you can see, one side is white and the other is black. You each saw one side and, therefore, are right about what you saw . . . When you vowed to be friends always, to be faithful and true to each other, did you reckon with Eshu? Do you know that he who does not put Eshu first in all his doings has himself to blame if things misfire? (Ogundipe, in Gates [1988] 1989: 35)

Cultural critic Louis Henry Gates finds deep insight into the ‘indeterminacy of interpretation’ (35) in this myth. For Gates, both friends are right, and both are also wrong. The hat is both black and white, but the ‘folly depicted here is to insist . . . on one determinate meaning, itself determined by vantage point’ (35).

The story of Eshu’s cap illustrates the paradox that deception can reveal truth – an important insight into persuasion and propaganda. Eshu teaches us that context shapes meaning; point of view determines belief; and truth is contingent. Do we know for certain that we perceive the same events as those around us? Eshu reminds the two friends to make allowances for difference, ambiguity, uncertainty and possibility. Eshu’s trick reminds us to question our certainty when interpreting symbolic communication.

Gates takes Eshu’s playful deceptions as a model to define the cultural critic’s role. The critic ‘improvises’ on the given materials, repeating and revising previous works, translating meanings, making connections, circulating new texts. Gates calls this work ‘signifyin(g)’ to suggest its dual association with semiotics (signifying) and African-American word play (signifyin’). The signifyin(g) cultural critic searches for connections to express cultural values and beliefs, always with intent to invigorate, renew and foster understanding. Interpretation is always ‘indeterminate’ – unfinished and provisional – because we have different points of view, and these differences can make communication difficult and messy. In this text, we will perform as signifyin(g) critics by looking at various cultural practices regarding persuasion and influence, trying to remain open to differences of interpretation and opinion. In difference lies truth.

In her exploration of Winnebago Native American culture, anthropologist Barbara Babcock-Abrahams (1975) uses the phrase ‘a tolerated margin of mess’ to describe the trickster’s role in creating productive disorder. Out of the trickster’s mess come new perspectives and insights. The Greek god Hermes, North American Coyote, Norse Loki, Yoruba Eshu, Sufi Nasruddin and Hindu Krishna all may be ‘foolish’ and disruptive, but they bring gifts as well, including the gift of communication and the arts of persuasion and deception.

Their tricks are teaching stories. Krishna steals butter as a child and then denies it, asking his mother: 'Doesn't everything in the house belong to us?' 'All tricksters do this', comments Lewis Hyde, '[t]hey lie in a way that upsets our very sense of what is true and what is false, and therefore help us reimagine this world'. Aristotle attributes the birth of Western literature to Homer's creative lies: the Greek oral poet 'taught us the art of framing lies the right way . . . [c]lever at deceit, tricksters are clever at seeing through deceit, and therefore at revealing things hidden beneath the surface' (Hyde 2011: n.p.). Hyde emphasises the paradox of the trickster's performances: 'the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on' (1998: 9). Cultures need creative disruption to evolve and survive, as long as that disruption occurs within a tolerated margin of mess.

Anthropologist Victor Turner identifies tricksters with play, crossing boundaries and renewing culture. Noting the trickster's presence throughout diverse cultures, Turner associates the archetype with the brain's limbic system – a neural crossroads where physical sensations are translated into emotion, decision-making and action on the fly. Turner describes play and ritual as evolving into performance and theatre: 'Like many Trickster figures in myths . . . play can deceive, betray, beguile, delude' ([1987] 1988: 169). Play, the essence of improvisation, takes what we have at hand – what is – and recombines it to create something new – what could be. A stick becomes a magic wand. We make paper airplanes. The improvising jazz musician takes a popular melody as the inspiration for creative revisions. For Gates, Turner, Hyde and others, the trickster's creative play is cognitively complex and a gift to culture. We find the trickster's beguiling deceptions in advertising, entertainment, publicity, propaganda and culture jamming – all aiming to influence culture at the crossroads of change.

In what follows, we approach persuasion and propaganda as rhetorical performances involving playful, creative and even devious communication filled with suspect reasoning, colourful language and possible trickery. We will work across disciplines as signifyin(g) cultural critics to reveal the strategies and tactics of the persuasive arts. This theoretical and practical work is filled with paradox and contradiction and requires a doubleness of vision to see both sides of the story, the black *and* white of Eshu's cap. While advertising, marketing, public relations, political lobbying, rhetoric, persuasion and propaganda are sometimes described as curses of contemporary civilisation, they all depend for their success on creativity, invention, improvisation and

lively performance – the ‘flash of the spirit’. These activities may be disruptive, messy and in bad taste; as with Eshu’s tricks, however, they push culture in new directions, both invigorating and destructive.

Exercise questions

1. In your own words, tell a trickster tale to your study group and discuss what it means.
2. Describe two examples of persuasive performance, one that successfully persuades you and one that does not. What accounts for the difference? Distinguish between the language, the argument and the beliefs or values expressed. Where do your beliefs influence your evaluation?
3. Illustrate how a cultural critic develops new insights by repeating and revising the work of others on one of the themes introduced in the Preface.
4. How do we know what is true or false?

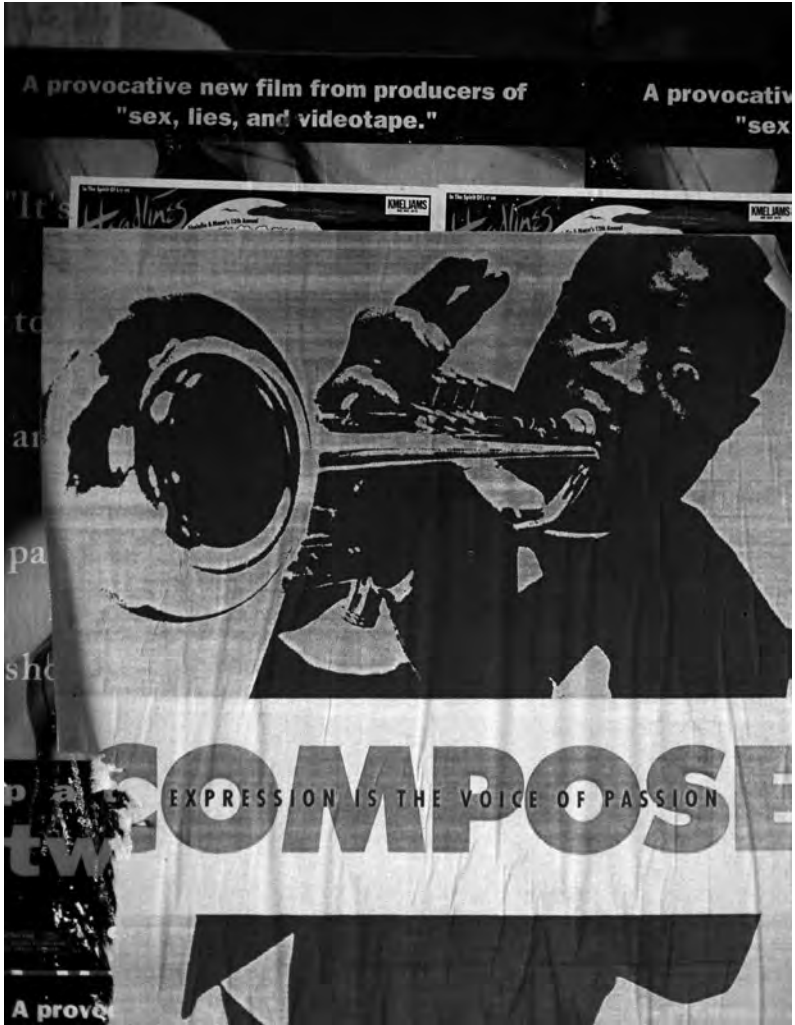


Figure 1 'Compose'. Photo: M. Soules, San Francisco, 1991.
Improvisation and performance are important in creative communication.

Introduction

The Spectrum of Persuasion

Media maelstrom

Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control is the object now. And to generate heat not light is the intention. (McLuhan [1951] 1967: v)

The Mechanical Bride was Marshall McLuhan's early attempt to warn readers that the media, saturated with advertising and persuasive messages, were pulling the public into a whirlpool of narcissism, distraction and confusion. McLuhan announced his intent by asking: 'Why not assist the public to observe consciously the drama which is intended to operate upon it unconsciously?' ([1951] 1967: v) McLuhan was troubled by what he saw. Advertisers had successfully turned the automobile into an object of erotic desire – the 'mechanical bride' of McLuhan's title – and the Catholic media critic did not condone adultery. Original at the time, McLuhan's early 'probes' became the clichés of our time.

In 1957, Vance Packard revealed that motivational psychology had been adopted by advertisers and other compliance professionals. While today we might find Packard's warning mundane, at the time of publication *The Hidden Persuaders* was alarming:

Large-scale efforts are being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions, and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry and social sciences. Typically these efforts take place beneath our level of awareness . . . (Packard [1957] 2007: 31)

Smokers learned – as the TV series *Mad Men* reminds us – that they were not buying cigarettes for their taste, but for the brand's image. In blindfolded taste tests, they could not distinguish between brands.

Packard was equally disturbed to see Eisenhower and Nixon packaged and sold to voters like products, with PR firms acting as election strategists. While Packard's claims were widely disputed at the time, new research in message processing affirms his assertions and more.

Scientists now know that cognitive overload depletes self-control, leaving us more vulnerable to suggestion (DeSteno 2014: 220; Vohs and Faber 2007). McLuhan retells Poe's horror story 'Descent into the Maelstrom' to convey the increasing sense of disorientation created by the deluge of persuasive messages in 1950s media, especially from television and illustrated magazines. In Poe's short story, a sailor narrowly escapes death when he and his ship are pulled into a giant maelstrom or whirlpool. The sailor saves himself by overcoming his panic and remaining observant, 'studying the action of the whirlpool and by co-operating with it' ([1951] 1967: v). For the remainder of his career, McLuhan followed his own advice by immersing himself in the media maelstrom to investigate the strategies of observation, analysis and action needed to survive in the electronic 'global village'.

In the 1960s, McLuhan became famous for observing that electronic media extend the central nervous system into the equivalent of a global network. (This network was like a village, because electronic media such as television, radio and satellites reassert orality and community against the dominance of print technology, which McLuhan considered isolating and individualistic.) Opportunities for learning and cooperation through the new technologies were potentially transformative, but he worried that the deluge of messages would result in 'Narcissus narcosis' – a condition of numbness and self-absorption caused by fascination with reflected images, reverberating echoes and sensory overload. Narcissus' delusion was not falling in love with himself, says McLuhan; rather, it was mistaking his own reflection for someone else. Narcissus lacks discernment and deceives himself with a reflected image. McLuhan concludes that humans 'become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves' ([1964] 1994: 41). McLuhan pioneered the 'Media Ecology' approach (media-ecology.org/) that explores the ways media shape cultures and discipline audiences.

Sixty years after the publication of *The Mechanical Bride*, O'Reilly and Tennant ([2009] 2010) echo McLuhan's concerns by concluding that 'we live in an age of persuasion, where people's wants, wishes, whims, pleas, brands, offers, enticements, truths, petitions, and propaganda swirl in a ceaseless, growing multimedia firestorm of sales messages' (xiii). For the authors, this is not a conspiracy, but something we bring upon ourselves: 'We are – all of us – its creators and its practi-

tioners' (xxvi). O'Reilly and Tennant do not want to take themselves or their subject too seriously, since 'our culture has bigger worries than fallout from a daily profusion of advertising' (xxvi). As O'Reilly proves in his popular CBC radio broadcasts (*The Age of Persuasion, Under the Influence*), advertising can be creative and entertaining, as well as misleading and hazardous to human health.

The spectrum of persuasion from rhetoric to propaganda

Persuasion and propaganda are built on the foundation of rhetoric – a topic explored more fully in Chapter 1. From the Greek *rhetor* for public speaker, rhetoric is the art of communicating effectively and persuasively in a particular context. Aristotle defines rhetoric as 'the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion' (350 BCE: *Rhetoric* 1.2.1). For Aristotle, rhetoric leverages *logos* (logic and reason), *pathos* (appeals to emotion) and *ethos* (character, ethics) to persuade audiences. Rhetoric has a history of abuse, and in our time 'rhetoric' often refers dismissively to language filled with empty phrases and false sentiments. Ideally, rhetoric gives language additional interest and impact and is judged by its effectiveness. Leith suggests the potential of rhetoric to command attention in his title *Words Like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama* (2012).

Persuasion seeks to change attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours, with mutual needs being met. Trust affects persuasion directly. For O'Reilly and Tennant ([2009] 2010), persuasion always involves an implied contract – some benefit is promised. The contract is broken and trust undermined if the promise is not delivered (29). (In Aristotle's scheme, an undelivered promise would be a failure of *ethos*, of the communicator's character.) When a persuasive message is designed to benefit only the sender, it moves toward propaganda or coercion. Propaganda involves 'systematic and deliberate attempts to sway mass public opinion in favour of the objectives of the institutions (usually state or corporate) sending the propaganda message' (Snow [1998] 2010: 66).

Persuasion requires an 'anchor' – an existing belief or attitude – to be successful. Anchors provide focus, motivation and salience (prominence or significance) for target audiences. Peer pressure and social norms exert powerful influences and act as anchors of belief. Persuasive communicators build trust and rapport by acknowledging values and attitudes to anchor their argument. Since the existing anchor has already been internalised, the persuasive message is perceived as arising naturally from the self, often appearing as common sense rather

than persuasion. Schwartz (1974) describes persuasion as striking a 'responsive chord' when the message does not tell the audience what to think or feel, but instead triggers a thought, feeling or memory associated with the pitch. Ellul ([1965] 1973) says that propaganda attempts to 'take hold of the entire person', with an 'organised myth' acting as an anchoring belief. 'Through the myth it creates, propaganda imposes a complete range of intuitive knowledge, susceptible of only one interpretation' (11). Appeals to national values, social dreams or religious justifications serve as anchors to define – and limit – the persuasive argument. The assertion '[f]or all freedom-loving people, this is the only sensible approach' uses the anchor 'freedom-loving' to define a community of belief and then argues that this community has only one 'sensible' option.

As noted above, persuasion moves toward propaganda when it is consciously misleading or exploits beliefs, values and attitudes for the propagandist's benefit. An audience will tolerate a deceptive message to serve its own needs – as with climate change denial or the war on terror – but the 'propagandist cannot reveal the true intent of the message' (Jowett and O'Donnell 2006: 38). Audiences feel betrayed when they learn they have been manipulated, a common sensation for soldiers returning from conflict and seeing the effects of propaganda on the home front (Davis 2011; Fussell 1989).

Critics generally distinguish propaganda from persuasive campaigns based on considerations of intention, scope, consequences and sponsors. Paul Rutherford (2000) says that 'propaganda is both the language and the instrument of power' (8) and acknowledges the difficulty of distinguishing it from marketing, public relations and advertising. In his broad definition, public service announcements (PSAs) and advocacy campaigns are examples of 'endless propaganda'; a battle for 'that most valuable (because most scarce) of commodities, public attention' (7). Snow (1998) and Aufderheide (2007) define propaganda by its powerful sponsors: governments, large organisations or corporations.

To distinguish between persuasion and propaganda, it helps to go back to first principles, since propaganda has become widely associated with totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century, as popularised by Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*, as well as Huxley's *Brave New World*. In 1622, Pope Gregory XV founded the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*) as a department within the Catholic Church. Significantly influenced by Jesuits, this agency was charged with missionary work in newly discovered territories and in European coun-

tries where Protestantism threatened the Vatican's dominance. In this sense, propaganda propagates the faith through education and conversion. (The original congregation is now known as the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples.) In its original meaning, propaganda promotes belief and ideology leading toward conversion and action. While education ideally stimulates the mind to reflection and discovery, propaganda presents an 'organised myth' (Ellul [1965] 1973: 11) that limits options for discovering truth. From the beginning, propaganda had mixed results, some of them life-destroying. As Joseph Boyden relates in his powerful historical novel *The Orenda* (2013), Jesuits spreading Catholic teachings in North America's wilderness in the seventeenth century may have been well-intended, even when they were struggling with their own faith, but their propaganda campaign was disastrous for the First Nations.

In their three-volume analysis of propaganda as the 'symbolic instrument', Lasswell and his colleagues attempt to disprove the misconception that propaganda is chiefly a product of the twentieth century, the 'spontaneous' creation of authoritarian regimes under Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini (1979: xii). They argue instead that propaganda supplemented military force and diplomacy to build civilisations throughout recorded history, though its reach and scale accelerated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Propaganda campaigns waged during the Great War (1914–18) and the Russian Revolution (1917) emerged from a complex matrix of influences: new communication technologies, including telegraph, newspapers, photography, radio and film; the ascendant power of large corporations seeking new markets; the rise of reform-minded (muckraking) journalism from 1890 to 1914; and the influence of art movements, psychology, sociology and marketing.

Taylor's *Munitions of the Mind* (1995) is a history of propaganda since the Trojan War mainly concerned with military conflict, but he finds that conflict waged in the collective mind is as consequential as battles fought for physical dominance: 'If war is essentially an organised communication of violence, propaganda and psychological warfare are essentially organised processes of persuasion' (9). Using similar reasoning, Strangelove (2005) argues that capitalism 'operates as a form of empire, one that works not merely through the marketplace and the much maligned military-industrial complex of modern states, but also through the mind itself' (3). The clichés 'battle for mindshare' and 'battle for hearts and minds' reflect these insights.

Jowett and O'Donnell (2006) define propaganda as the 'deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and

direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist' (7). Their definition reflects the common view of propaganda as self-interested manipulation – an assumption that can be difficult to prove, because propagandists try to conceal their motivation and intent. In 1943, Churchill famously said to Stalin: 'In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies' (Jablonsky 1991: 172). Was Churchill's propaganda during WWII deceitful, self-interested manipulation or diplomacy in the national interest?

Propaganda differs from advertising and advocacy, because it must be broad in scope and must dominate messaging in mainstream media; the stakes (risks) are high, with considerable consequences; and there must be significant action – or inaction – based on changed attitudes. There is a difference between an advertising campaign to sell home security systems and the massive social mobilisation needed for a war against terror, even though both hinge on questions of security. The 'greenwashing' of the Canadian tar sands is propaganda and not public relations, because tar sands extraction contributes to massive air and water pollution, and the Canadian Government misreported environmental impact statistics to the United Nations (UN) (de Souza 2011). The energy company BP – formerly British Petroleum, but rebranded as Beyond Petroleum in 2000 – engages in public relations spin when it claims to invest heavily in sustainable energy. But this campaign becomes propaganda when BP participates in an industry-wide effort to discourage alternate energy sources. Self-interest and conscious deception hide BP's true motivations (Landman 2010).

Propaganda aims to win the compliance of its mass audience and mobilise it to act, or not act, in the propagandist's interests. To influence mass audiences, it requires the cooperation and agency of major communication channels. Only wealthy and powerful individuals and organisations can conduct propaganda campaigns. While many 'public service' organisations – from Greenpeace and Amnesty International to trade unions – aspire to that degree of influence, unsympathetic coverage of their campaigns in the corporate media undermines their effectiveness. They produce advocacy campaigns struggling for mind-share in the marketplace of ideas.

Categories of propaganda

Ellul (1965) identifies four categories of propaganda, each with its own motivations and strategies. While these categories complicate any

attempt to define propaganda simply, they are useful for illustrating the idea that persuasion operates along a spectrum of influence.

- *Political versus sociological propaganda*
Political propaganda is organised by a centralised body – government, political party, interest group – with specific goals. It is clearly distinguished from advertising and social advocacy by its political agenda. In contrast, sociological propaganda is embedded into the fabric of technological cultures. It has diverse origins and is more loosely organised. Entertainment and news media play an important role by defining fashions, trends, values and ethics and exporting those styles and values abroad as advertisements for national culture. ‘Sociological propaganda produces a progressive adaptation to a certain order of things, a certain concept of human relations, which unconsciously moulds individuals and makes them conform to society’ (Ellul [1965] 1973: 64).
- *Agitation versus integration propaganda*
Agitation propaganda stirs up its target audience to participate in revolution, war, increased production or rapid social change. It is highly visible and short-lived, because it is difficult to sustain at a volatile pitch. In contrast, integration propaganda promotes conformity, adjustment, acceptance of authority. Intellectuals and religious leaders contribute to integration by defining what is proper, appropriate and ethical. In revolutionary Russia, Lenin advocated agitation propaganda (agitprop) for the working classes to provoke them to action – mainly through drama, art or music – while propaganda proper was education in communist principles reserved for the more advanced vanguard (Lenin 1902).
- *Vertical versus horizontal propaganda*
Vertical propaganda is an exercise of authority directed by power elites, religious leaders and governments downward to the masses. It is often planned in secret, but executed with significant resources through mass media. Horizontal propaganda travels through grassroots, community and volunteer organisations. Leaders are guides and animators, rather than authority figures. In 1961, immediately after the success of the Cuban Revolution, the new government sent out an army of travelling students – *maestros ambulantes* – to teach illiterate workers to read and write using primers that communicated revolutionary values (Keeble 1961).
- *Irrational versus rational propaganda*
Propaganda is widely described as irrational, filled with false logic, arguments to emotion and appeals to beliefs, myths and

symbols. In contrast, rational propaganda presents itself as scientific evidence, sound reasoning, realism and common sense. As we will see, climate change denial or the justification of economic ideologies are buttressed by an apparatus of statistics and other evidence that is selective, distorting and misleading. (Ellul [1965] 1973: 62–87; Marlin 2002: 36–9)

Ellul says that propaganda's chief task is to 'solve problems created by technology, to play on maladjustments, and to integrate the individual into the technological world' ([1965] 1973: xvii). George Grant analyses propaganda designed to promote technology and has observed that leaders promote the 'dynamism of technology', because it promises the 'mastery of chance' (1969: 113). Those who promise to master chance in a technological society are rewarded with power. Postman (1992) coined the term 'technopoly' to describe the 'surrender of culture to technology', impossible without integration propaganda.

Propaganda must create a total environment of persuasion, using all available media and leaving no gaps to be filled with opposing views. Ellul considers propaganda necessary in a democracy simply because the masses participate in political decisions; paradoxically, propaganda 'renders the true exercise of [democracy] almost impossible' ([1965] 1973: xvi). Political propaganda endlessly promotes elite interests at the expense of public sentiment. Effective propaganda 'cannot be individual; it must be collective' (28), because 'in the collective passion created by propaganda, critical judgement disappears altogether' (170). Ellul's idea that collectives – whether crowds, mass audiences or nations – are incapable of 'discernment' (170) remains controversial (Lévy 1994; Surowiecki 2004; Castells 2012).

Performing in the public sphere

Persuasion and propaganda are performances for an audience. Erving Goffman's work on the 'presentation of self' advanced the idea that people inhabit 'multiple social realities', acting out their identities in bounded 'regions' equivalent to 'backstage' (informal, private) and 'front stage' (formal, public) performance spaces (Goffman 1959: 106ff; Alia 2004: 23–4). Goffman's analysis led to the performance studies of the 1980s and 90s. Schechner (1991) uses ethnographic studies of ritual drama by Turner (1982, 1987) and others to demonstrate the continuum of performance from play and ritual to stage drama and performance in everyday life. A bounding frame – a ritual setting, a stage with props – defines the performance space, where

anything can happen. Performance involves a ‘consciousness of doubleness’, where the performer’s action is ‘placed in mental comparison’ with some ideal or potential (Carlson 1996: 5). The everyday self is transformed through performance and given additional communication powers. In 1927, Hans Hoffmann took a remarkable series of photographs of Adolf Hitler rehearsing his future role as Führer in his studio (Hoffmann [1955] 2012; Ewen 1996: 156).

Persuasion and propaganda occur in a bounded performance space defined by Habermas (1962) as the *public sphere*. The public sphere is ‘made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state’ (176). Individuals inhabit a private *lifeworld*, where they are relatively autonomous and become active members of society when they enter the public sphere – any place they can engage in dialogue about the affairs of state: cafeterias and restaurants, public meetings, churches, schools, online discussion forums, blogs, social networks, call-in radio programmes, demonstrations and marches. Citizens assemble in the public sphere to engage with the *system*: the market economy, state apparatus (government, courts, law enforcement, military) and its agents, such as corporate media and special interest groups. This dialogue legitimates and endorses the authority of the democratic system. In turn, a healthy public sphere requires its media system to circulate trustworthy information and a range of opinions useful for citizen decision-making. Recall that propagandists need sufficient resources and the cooperation of mainstream media to communicate their dominant message.

Habermas believed the ideal public sphere should be accessible to all citizens, who are autonomous, free of coercion and protected by the rule of law. Fruitful debate requires commitment to reason and civility, and the supreme communication skill is persuasive argument based on rhetoric. The right of assembly and freedom of speech are necessary for a productive public sphere, and security at public gatherings is closely observed as a sign of tolerance for dissent. For citizens seeking social change through displays of solidarity, the public sphere is their stage.

This ideal public sphere has never been achieved. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ethnic, gender and class distinctions were reduced, but Habermas argued that the public sphere was deformed by expanding social engineering, culture industries and powerful private interests. Many critics, Ellul included, observe that system propaganda interferes with democratic dialogue by setting its own agenda and framing issues to reflect elite interests. For example, large, profit-making newspaper chains turned the press into an agent of

influence, rather than dialogue – ‘the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere’ (Habermas [1962] 1991: 185). According to Chomsky (2006), the system maintains the illusion of a functioning public sphere only to sanction the decisions of leaders. Limited public dissent is tolerated, even encouraged, to maintain the illusion of democracy.

Decoding media discourse: ideology, hegemony, power

To understand discourse in the public sphere, we need a suitable communication model to describe message circulation. In Stuart Hall’s model of *encoding* and *decoding*, the sender encodes ‘raw’ data into a message using a code suitable for transmission, such as an alphabet, Morse code, or binary code. The sender transmits the message through a suitable medium and the receiver must decode the message to understand it. The transmission medium influences the message and must be taken into account during encoding. For example, the same story is encoded differently for television and for print publication. Message transmission is degraded by noise and other forms of interference, including distractions. Both encoding and decoding depend on ‘technical infrastructure’ (a medium), ‘relations of production’ (ability to encode and decode) and shared ‘frameworks of knowledge’ (for mutual understanding) (Hall [1980] 2006: 164–5).

Ideology and power relations influence message encoding and decoding. *Ideology*, and its relation to power, is defined as the ‘shared ideas or beliefs which serve to justify the interests of dominant groups’ (Giddens 1997: 583). Ideology legitimises power relations and is necessary for maintaining those relations. Persuasion and propaganda are necessary in democracies, because the powerful must constantly reaffirm and rationalise their dominance to pacify citizen doubts and complaints, make the social order seem natural and encourage trust in the system. Antonio Gramsci (1971) adds to our understanding of ideology and power with his concept of *hegemony*, where dominant ideologies are so widespread and accepted that they are ‘taken for granted’ (172) and expressed as common sense. For example, the claim that capitalism represents economic freedom and fits naturally with democracy’s political freedom is a common hegemonic construct. Closer inspection reveals that capitalism and democracy as practised offer more freedom for some than others.

While the sender encodes the message to encourage a certain interpretation, there is no guarantee the message will be decoded as intended. In Hall’s model, the receiver has an opportunity to co-

create the message with the sender or to respond if there is a feedback loop. For communication to persuade, the sender must anticipate the receiver's response – a premise developed in the Theory of Mind: the idea that humans can infer and anticipate what other humans are thinking and feeling. 'The ability to see the world from another person's vantage point is . . . essential for constructing a mental model of another person's complex thoughts and intentions in order to predict and manipulate' (Ramachandran [2011] 2012: 118). Hall identifies three decoding strategies:

- *Dominant-hegemonic decoding*: the receiver accepts the message as reliable and authoritative. For example, universal health care is a common good that should be provided by the government.
- *Negotiated decoding*: the receiver accepts the dominant view with some reservations. We might accept that universal health care is a common good, but oppose a particular plan advanced by the government.
- *Oppositional decoding*: the receiver understands the message and rejects its meaning outright. Universal health care is not a common good and should not be legislated. This opposition may be thoroughly reasoned or ideological, based on beliefs or biases. ([1980] 2006: 172)

When negotiating meaning, people frequently rely on a network of 'texts', such as religious teachings or historical events, to guide their responses. Persuasive communicators thus enter into a dialogue with other texts, perhaps by citing a well-known story or famous quotation. Bakhtin's (1982) idea of *dialogism* – that all cultural texts, in any media, can engage in dialogue with one another – is related to Gates' idea of cultural criticism as 'repetition and revision', as discussed in the Preface. We often refer to other people's words and thoughts to add substance and credibility to our own communications. The result is dialogical discourse – a blending of voices reflecting the give-and-take of dialogue, ideally open-ended and context sensitive. In contrast, monological discourse speaks with one authoritative voice and attempts to restrict possibility. Monologic discourse is typified by the military command or voice of authority seeking no response but obedience, as in G. W. Bush's 2001 pronouncement '[t]hose who harbour terrorists will be brought to justice' or Orwell's 'BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* [1949] 1989).

Michel Foucault thinks of discourse as having a 'genealogy', in which history is revised to suit the purposes of the present. The 'effects of power' alter history and thus shape the negotiation of meaning

(1984: 55), as they did when Stalin and other Soviet leaders revised the history of the Communist Revolution (Priestland 2009). In his ‘people’s history’ of the US, Zinn (1980) shifted the focus of attention to redefine American perceptions of power and justice. For Foucault, power is not a commodity to be possessed, but a system of rhetorical practices that must constantly be rationalised, (re)asserted and exercised or power will change hands. Especially in a democracy, demonstrations of power are more successful if they are not experienced as uniformly negative (Foucault 1984: 61). Power is not merely a force of repression. It can control and accomplish things, be productive. These practices, often repeated and revised in unacknowledged ways, make the exercise of power a performance.

In persuasive communication, the sender often tries to position the receiver in a hierarchy of power by claiming authority, knowledge or moral superiority. Foucault identifies three ways to turn subjects into objects of power:

- *Dividing practices*: Subjects are divided either within themselves or from others by a process of exclusion that is justified by science or social science. For example, in the eighteenth century, a scientific definition was required before ‘insane’ people could be incarcerated. Cohen ([1972] 2002) shows that identifying ‘folk devils’ can precipitate a ‘moral panic’. Current dividing practices label people ‘terrorists’ whether they are killing for revenge, fighting for political determination or demonstrating for environmental protections.
- *Scientific classification*: The subject is defined as a statistic, a type, a representative, a demographic, a psychographic, a unit of production, a member of a discipline or profession. Officials identify, catalogue, institutionalise and discipline anyone considered antisocial or perverse.
- *Subjectification*: Subjects objectify themselves by self-identifying with others: left, right, conservative, progressive, Muslim, atheist. People also repress their true subject positions to avoid being singled out as different. (Rabinow 1984: 7–11)

Case study: Orientalism

As a dispossessed Palestinian, Edward Said embraced Gramsci’s idea in the *Prison Notebooks* (1971) that critical intelligence begins with self-knowledge, of knowing oneself ‘as a product of the historical process’ that leaves behind ‘an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory’

(Said [1978] 2000: 90). *Orientalism* (1978) is Said's personal inventory, written in response to the Arab–Israeli War of June 1967, and remains an influential study of hegemony. Said is centrally concerned with Western scholarly and media portrayals of the Orient – the Middle East, North Africa and Islam – for ideological purposes:

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilisations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. ([1978] 2000: 68)

Orientalism is 'a way of seeing that imagines, emphasises, exaggerates and distorts differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the US. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous' (Arab American National Museum 2011: n.p.). Orientalism becomes a hegemonic construct through 'supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines' (Said [1978] 2000: 68) that circulate and cross-reference these views of the Orient. Western experts on the Orient present their observations as conventional wisdom and common sense, when, in fact, they are expressing a 'Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (69). Objectifying the Orient allows the West to define itself as separate and different, a classic example of Foucault's dividing practices. Long-standing religious differences between Islam, Christianity and Judaism contribute to these dividing practices.

Orientalism is a story divorced from reality. Said uses an example from Flaubert's travels to Egypt in 1849–50 to symbolise Orientalism's strategies and illustrate that Europeans describe their Orient without its consent:

Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a wildly influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what ways she was 'typically Oriental'. ([1978] 2000: 72 [emphasis in original; all instances of italics in quotations are emphases in original])

Flaubert's story illustrates that ideas of dominance and superiority are embedded in ethnography (or history) and that 'these representations

rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient' (88). Flaubert's narrative gains additional resonance for Said from the obvious sexual nature of the encounter, with its themes of dominance, exploitation and possession.

In *Covering Islam* (1981), Said supplements his analysis of historical Orientalism with an examination of contemporary media coverage of the Middle East. It is an 'unacceptable generalisation', he asserts, to identify many societies and beliefs and over a billion people all as Islam; this approach 'could never be used for any other religious, cultural, or demographic group on earth' ([1981] 1997: xvi). When such generalisations are embedded in cultural discourse and accepted without question, they provide the foundation for propaganda. Huntington (1993) frames global conflict as an epic confrontation between civilisations, though he places greatest emphasis on the clash between Islam and the West, asserting that 'Islam has bloody borders' (35). Said challenged this reduction of both the West and Islam into crude stereotypes similar to the cartoon figures of Popeye and Bluto. According to Said, Huntington, and those following his lead, are 'presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilisation' (Said 2001: n.p.). Hegemony lives through its sweeping generalisations.

Instead of this biased narrative of warring civilisations, Said demands wider frames and fewer stereotypes:

These are tense times, but it is better to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities, the secular politics of reason and ignorance, and universal principles of justice and injustice, than to wander off in search of vast abstractions. (2001: n.p.)

The clash of civilisations theory is a gimmick, he concludes, 'better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time'.

Frames and narratives

Orientalism and the clash of civilisations hypothesis act as frames to construct a picture of cultural identity. Frames are cognitive structures that shape the way we perceive, reason and act. They allow us to understand reality in the form of narratives. Goffman (1974) compares a frame to a dramatic script, complete with actors, roles, props and motivations. As a sociologist, he observed that all institutions require frames to define typical activities and their sequence, employee roles and hierarchies and expectations for clients or customers. Political

candidates mount the stage to make speeches, while handlers and strategists work the back rooms, corridors and auditoriums. They all perform within expectations, using scripts. Talking points frame a political or public relations message to ensure all the players stay ‘on message’. News editors and reporters use frames to define the context and significance of stories and to encourage conclusions. As a narrative device, framing exerts a powerful influence on storytelling and audience interpretation.

Cognitive scientist George Lakoff thinks frames are central to political discourse because ‘[w]e live our narratives’ (Lakoff [2008] 2009: 33). Frames anchor political narratives:

Language gets its power because it is defined relative to frames, prototypes, metaphors, narratives, images, and emotions . . . If we hear the same language over and over, we will think more and more in terms of the frames and metaphors activated by that language. ([2008] 2009: 15)

Constant repetition reinforces neural circuits, enhances memorability and encourages acceptance of the frame. Political discourse is thus a contest to see who can define the dominant frames. These stories are neurally inscribed into familiar pathways of thinking and feeling and seem to arise spontaneously when sufficiently widespread.

Frames operate mainly in the unconscious and require conscious reflection to bring into awareness. Narrative constructs, such as the British Empire, the Irish Troubles, American exceptionalism, Canadian peacekeeping, Western decadence, Eastern mysticism, the war on terror and the clash of civilisations are so deeply encoded they are hard to reframe. By bringing assumptions, expectations and scenarios into consciousness, frame analysis makes it possible to adjust or contest hegemonic narratives. For example, Tony Blair’s speech to the US Congress frames the invasion of Iraq as a question of religious fanaticism:

That is what this struggle against terrorist groups or states is about. We’re not fighting for domination. We’re not fighting for an American world, though we want a world in which America is at ease. We’re not fighting for Christianity, but against religious fanaticism of all kinds. (Blair 2003: n.p.)

Notice what Blair excludes from the frame and what he places squarely within it. He is silent on a number of important factors: there is no mention of oil or insecurity or global markets, because these concerns fall outside the current ideological frame. Framing determines what

is included and excluded from accounts and stories and thus involves ethical issues of transparency and deception.

Ethics of persuasion

It must be evident to everyone that it is more praiseworthy for a prince always to maintain good faith, and practice integrity rather than craft and deceit. And yet the experience of our own times has shown that those princes have achieved great things who made small account of good faith, and who understood by cunning to circumvent the intelligence of others; and that in the end they got the better of those whose actions were dictated by loyalty and good faith. (Machiavelli [1532] 1997: 67)

Ethics is a central concern in the persuasive performance. While it is common to assume that deception in persuasion is unethical, no matter the motivation, an opposing narrative praises clever deception and pragmatic Machiavellian realism. The extreme of this position is the saying: 'If you're not cheating, you're not trying hard enough'. In a text almost as relevant today as it was in sixteenth century Italy, Machiavelli (1532) plays on this ambivalence when advising his prince on affairs of state. We find this ambivalence in studies of advertising and public relations (O'Reilly and Tennant 2009; Twitchell 1996; Bernays 1947); in television dramas such as *Mad Men*; and in documentaries on Nazi Germany fascinated with the propaganda of Goebbels (*Das Goebbels Experiment* 2005) or Riefenstahl (*The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* 1993). The Machiavellian *realpolitik* (practical politics) of Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State for Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford in the 1970s, remains controversial. Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973 for brokering peace in Vietnam, Kissinger is also associated with Operation Condor – a covert effort to displace socialist leaders and organisers in South America (Hitchens 2001). The aphorism 'all's fair in love and war' captures the sense of this ethical dilemma. A popular title among contemporary business readers, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* ([500 BCE] 1962) advises that 'all warfare is based on deception' (66): 'He who knows the art of the direct and indirect approach will be victorious. Such is the art of manoeuvring' (106).

Plato and Aristotle both recognised that ethics depends on perceptions of truth, and Plato warned of the dangerous use of rhetoric to deceive. The more pragmatic Aristotle catalogued rhetorical techniques and related them to the dramatic arts. Aristotle believed that rhetoric should be more concerned with performing an effective

argument than with discovering ideal truth. However, if persuasive communicators are not held accountable for deception and lack of transparency, they are encouraged to take a ‘free hand’ in the future: ‘Without pursuing matters of truth, we open ourselves to accusations of disinterest in wrongdoing and share the responsibility that goes with willful blindness’ (Marlin 2002: 200). We share responsibility for safeguarding a climate of truth-telling based on the ‘principle of veracity’ that honesty is preferable to deception, because it needs no defence (Bok [1978] 1979: 32–3).

Questions of objectivity and bias complicate the study of persuasion and propaganda, as they must, since we are dealing with perceptions, perspectives and beliefs. The story of Eshu’s cap reminds us that point of view, or context, determines perceptions of truth. Alia (2004) describes the ‘Rashomon Effect’ in news reporting: “‘truth’ is really *truths* and is always based on multiple realities’ (23). She refers to Kurosawa’s film *Rashomon* (1950), in which a crime is witnessed from four contradictory points of view. While some debates can be resolved by evidence – for example, the existence of global warming, weapons of mass destruction or species evolution – belief and opinion often trump evidence where human loyalties are involved. We return to the question of ethics and persuasion in the final chapter.

Exercise questions

1. Describe a recent discussion you have had in which there was a dispute over the interpretation of facts. How was the dispute resolved (if it was)?
2. Illustrate Ellul’s four categories of propaganda with contemporary examples.
3. Describe, in writing, an example of unethical behaviour – and what makes it unethical – and then discuss your example with your study group.
4. In what ways do you experience the system’s ‘colonisation’ of the public sphere?
5. Hall distinguishes between dominant-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional decoding of messages. Using your own examples, illustrate the differences between these responses.
6. Provide examples of ‘dividing practices’ in recent media reporting.
7. Describe the framing devices used in a news story or magazine article.
8. Hegemony (Gramsci 1971) is an important concept in the study of

propaganda. What is your understanding of this term and where do you see it operating in your country?

9. Describe a propaganda campaign currently active in your country. In your description, define propaganda and distinguish it from advertising, advocacy, public relations and lobbying. What roles do ideology and hegemony play? Who is responsible? Who provides funding?



Figure 2 'Army of one'. Photo: M. Soules, Las Vegas, 2014.
Words compete with weapons for power.