Propaganda 2.1

—————————————————— Propaganda in the Digital Age

What is Propaganda 2.1?

Propaganda 2.0 is not the same phenomenon as propaganda 1.0. Rhetorical criticism is still useful, but it loses some of its bite when you're faced with a virtually infinite array of different media, all concentrated under the ownership of a handful of corporations, all publishing, streaming, and beaming stories to us from essentially within the same corporate narrative (support for neoliberal economic policy and neoconservative foreign policy). And we shall all be in an entirely different, and to many, frightening cognitive universe when that uniform narrative breaks down. This is the essence of propaganda 2.1.

Propaganda 2.0, the model of systematic, total propaganda described by Jacques Ellul, is a system of maximum redundancy. It is a system based on the mass manufacture and distribution of uniform bits of information, a system embodying a one-to-many flow of information. All media in the propaganda system work together, reinforcing one another. But in the digital age, the age of decentralized information, we will necessarily be exposed to diverse and often paradoxical points of view. Propaganda 2.1 is a model of competing propagandas, of uncertainty and doubt. It is a model of infinite information, and extremely high entropy. And that has turned out to be a refreshing thing for some, but an unnerving thing for many people who were raised in the environment of propaganda 2.0—and especially for those who owe their power and privilege to its existence.

Information theory tells us that, while many demands are made on our critical thinking skills, our judgment, and our sense of personal responsibility, there are opportunities for learning in such an environment, far more

than the uniform narratives of propaganda 2.0 provided. Much of the new information we encounter will, of course, be questionable, much downright false. But much of it will be useful to us, and useful precisely because it is alien to our sensibilities. It becomes, then, our responsibility to sort through it, weigh it, evaluate it, and either accept it or reject it.

The Emergence of Global Society

The twentieth century quickly became the age of electronic media, and in the last half of that century the dominant medium of mass communication in the technologically developed world was television. It is here that we see Ellul's model of systematic total propaganda in its full florescence. It is here too that we recognize the formation of what Marshall McLuhan called "the global village,"[1] a place where we "share too much about each other to be strangers," where "you don't necessarily have harmony, you have extreme concern with everybody else's business and much involvement in everybody else's life." It is a place where "everybody is maliciously engaged in poking their nose into everybody else's business."[2]

McLuhan's description of life in this global village is illuminating, as it reveals the paradoxical but necessary condition of propaganda 2.0: the prerequisite strong ethos of individualism coexisting within a uniform mass.

> The electronic surround of information that has tended to make man a superman at the same time reduces him into a pitiable nobody by merging him with everybody. It has extended man in a colossal, superhuman way, but it has not made individuals feel important . . . The ordinary man can feel so pitiably weak that, like a skyjacker, he'll reach for a superhuman dimension of world coverage in a wild, desperate effort for fulfillment, or he will buy a private psychiatrist to be an audience.[3]

Along with the consequent alienation that humans experience under the influence of propaganda 2.0, we should also recognize the entropic effects of the mass media; explosions of commoditized information opening us up to new ideas, new points of view, and world events we never experienced before their existence. Think of the events that took place in the 1950s, sixties, and seventies, events that, through the new medium of television, Americans experienced as both individuals and as a mass: the civil rights movement, the

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1. McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy,* 31.
2. McLuhan et al., *Forward Through the Rearview Mirror,* 40.
3. McLuhan et al., *Forward Through the Rearview Mirror,* 85.

Vietnam War and subsequent anti-war movement, the massacres at Mỹ Lai and Kent State, the rise of "Black power" and radical student movements, the political assassinations, Woodstock, the awakening of a counterculture, the mind-altering drugs, the burgeoning ecology movement, the Watergate scandal and subsequent resignation of a sitting president—all of it coming into our homes on a daily basis. It was a tumultuous and, for many, frightening and disorienting time. For others, it may have seemed as though a moment of liberation was upon us.

This moment of high entropy, however, was followed, as we should have expected, by a period of increased redundancy and suppression of meaningful information—for the sake of the technocultural system's stability. Television, at the same time it was opening us up to a larger world of events, was also acting as a feedback loop, delivering all the social, cultural, and political ferment of the era to the powers that had the biggest stake in controlling the system and maintaining (and expanding) the postwar capitalist status quo. That system was, indeed, becoming increasingly unstable and in danger of collapse as a result of the growing "turn on, tune in, drop out" counterculture ethos. "From 1969 to 1972," wrote political scientist David Vogel in 1989, "virtually the entire American business community experienced a series of political setbacks without parallel in the postwar period."[4] The system's controlling powers had to do something quickly. They did. They created the myth of the "liberal media."

The Zenith of Propaganda 2.0

On August 23, 1971, Louis F. Powell (only months before becoming US president Richard M. Nixon's choice as associate justice of the Supreme Court) sent a confidential memorandum to a powerful friend in the US Chamber of Commerce, Eugene B. Sydnor Jr. At the time, Sydnor was the chair of the Chamber's Education Committee. In this memorandum, Powell described what he called an "Attack on [the] American Free Enterprise System" that had been underway, Powell claimed, for decades. The memo is notable for its Cold War rhetoric as well as for what may be some of the first glimpses of the now pervasive neoconservative ideology. In the first few pages Powell identifies the parties responsible for this assault:

> The sources are varied and diffused. They include, not unex-
> pectedly, the Communists, New Leftists and other revolution-
> aries who would destroy the entire system, both political and

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4. Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes*.

economic. These extremists of the left are far more numerous, better financed, and increasingly are more welcomed and encouraged by other elements of society, than ever before in our history. But they remain a small minority, and are not yet the principal cause for concern.[5]

This is almost boilerplate Cold War, paranoid anti-communist rhetoric—no real surprise, given the time at which it was written. But Powell goes on to name other groups and social institutions which, in the coming decades, would become familiar targets of establishment power:

The most disquieting voices joining the chorus of criticism, come from perfectly respectable elements of society: from the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences, and from politicians.[6]

Powell's essential claim is that the American higher education system, the news media, and democratic government itself were deliberately engaging in what Ellul called propaganda of agitation and waging nothing less than a revolutionary campaign to bring down the free market and subvert the American way of life.

Noting that "much of the media . . . either voluntarily accords unique publicity to these 'attackers,' or at least allows them to exploit the media for their purposes," adding, "This is especially true of television, which now plays such a predominant role in shaping the thinking, attitudes and emotions of our people."[7] Powell found it ironic that "the media, including the national TV systems, are owned and theoretically controlled by corporations which depend upon profits, and the enterprise system to survive."[8] He then made specific suggestions about what the Chamber could do to bring the American people back to a level of satisfaction with and support for business. He suggested, among other things, that the television networks should be "monitored" to identify "insidious type[s] of criticism of the enterprise system,"[9] that equal time be given to pro-corporate spokespersons, that "incentives" should be created "to induce more 'publishing' by independent scholars who do believe in the system,"[10] and that corpora-

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5. Powell, "Attack on American Free Enterprise System," 2.

6. Powell, "Attack on American Free Enterprise System," 2–3.

7. Powell, "Attack on American Free Enterprise System," 3.

8. Powell, "Attack on American Free Enterprise System," 3–4.

9. Powell, "Attack on American Free Enterprise System," 21.

10. Powell, "Attack on American Free Enterprise System," 22.

tions should become actively involved in US politics.[11] "As unwelcome as it may be to the Chamber, it should consider assuming a broader and more vigorous role in the political arena."[12]

The overall effect of the Powell memorandum must be seen then within the context of widespread social change. It was only a single point of inspiration—the religious right, for example, provided another—among several. But it is important to note that a number of neoconservative organizations, including Accuracy in Media and Accuracy in Academia, were created in the years immediately following Powell's missive, the corporate presence in Washington increased fivefold between 1968 and 1978, corporate lobbyists went from being insignificant to critical players in the legislative process, corporate political action committees increased from about three hundred in 1976 to more than twelve hundred by 1980,[13] and Roger Ailes[14] suggested to President Nixon that the Republican Party start their own television network.[15]

The first—and simplest—task for the US Chamber of Commerce and American business was to take control of government. In the US, the technoculture has always benefitted from maintaining a good working relationship with government (with the possible exception of the New Deal years) and with the increased presence of corporate government relations offices and lobbyists in Washington, and increased injections of money into candidates' campaigns via corporate political action committees, these relationships only improved.

The second task was to take control of the means of production and distribution of information. This was a bit more complicated because, on paper at least, the US mass media were already owned by corporations and had always operated according to the principles of the free market. Newspapers' advertising revenues far outstripped their revenues from subscription. Television advertising rates were based on the numbers of viewers each network or its shows could attract. So it was important to give the reader/viewer what he or she wanted. From the technical point of view information is, after all, information, and the job of the journalist is nothing more

11. Powell, "Attack on American Free Enterprise System," 24–26.

12. Powell, "Attack on American Free Enterprise System," 26.

13. Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes*, 59.

14. Ailes was a media consultant to then-candidate Richard M. Nixon in the 1968 presidential campaign. He was named the CEO of Fox News by Rupert Murdoch in October of 1996 and remained in control until July of 2016, when he was forced to resign in the face of multiple charges of workplace sexual harassment. He died on May 18, 2017.

15. Romenesko, "Memo from 1970."

than to find information and report it. But television was different from the traditional press. Because broadcasters use what was then considered to be a shared national resource—the electromagnetic spectrum—to transmit their programming, television stations were licensed by the Federal Communications Commission and in order to keep a license a broadcaster had to demonstrate that they were serving "the public interest, convenience, and necessity." As a consequence of all this, the first few decades of television journalism actually resulted in a more informed populace; more informed, at least, than they had been before the television era.

For this second task the technoculture got some assistance from Mark Fowler, the chair of the FCC under Ronald Reagan. A Friedmanian supply-sider and neoconservative who believed in market freedom, deregulation, and the responsibility of the individual consumer to choose his own products wisely, Fowler claimed that television had no greater responsibility to the public than any other home appliance, because TV was just "a toaster with pictures."[16]

In a paradigm-shifting 1982 article, Fowler redefined the idea of public service within the context of market forces, gave us a clear vision of the role of television in a competitive global society, and a preview of what a deregulated, "free market" media environment would look like:

> The perception of broadcasters as community trustees should be replaced by a view of broadcasters as marketplace participants . . . Instead of [the FCC] defining public demand . . . the commission should rely on the broadcasters' ability to determine the wants of their audience through the normal mechanisms of the marketplace. The public's interest, then, defines the public interest.[17]

Thanks to Mark Fowler and the Communications Act of 1984 (and subsequent acts) the present economic structure of television—dependent on advertising revenues for operation, owned by large and wealthy corporations (many of them multinational or even foreign-owned), competing for viewers in an ever-tightening, increasingly digital market, unburdened by the requirement to operate in the public interest—ensured and continues to ensure that we will continue to consume programming that supports, rather than challenges, the values of the technological society.[18] In other words, increase the redundancy within the system and minimize to the greatest possible extent any entropic influences.

16. Brainard, *Television,* 61.

17. Brainard, *Television*, 62.

18. Fallon, *Metaphysics of Media,* 209–10.

This was the high point of propaganda 2.0, and the general outline of the social, political, and economic context into which propaganda 2.1 is introduced at the end of the twentieth century. Propaganda 2.0—the propaganda model of Ellul's technological society—is one of virtually infinite redundancy—but redundancy that comes in a thousand different flavors and colors. The major difference (an ontological one) between propaganda 2.0 and propaganda 2.1 is the difference between the powerful conforming forces of virtually infinite redundancy on the one hand, and the often frightening and confusing feeling of liberation through virtually infinite entropy on the other. It is the difference between centralized control of information based on a one-to-many model, and a completely unregulated, multidirectional, free flow of information.

The Dilemma of Propaganda 2.1

The internet gave us that unregulated, multidirectional information flow. It was not necessarily the intentions of its creators to do so, but it was the result nonetheless. Their intention was to build a nonlinear, decentralized network of virtually infinite centers; if every point on the internet is its center, then at the same time *no single point* can be its center. To lose New York or Chicago or Washington, DC—or all of them—in a nuclear attack would not mean a loss of communication with the rest of the network; messages would simply be routed around the network's breach.

This was the revolutionary mutation in the genome of the technoculture, as it promised—for the first time in human history—individuals not only to be passive receivers of information, but active creators and distributors as well. If, as Marshall McLuhan insisted, media are the extensions of the human person, the internet represented the possibility of the global extension of *mind*: the possibility of human thought unleashed across the globe, and all that this implies. There would be, at first at least, bursts of creative and expressive energy, of intellectual ferment, of questions asked and answers proffered.

However, the rise of the internet also represented the *opposite* of all that. The internet may be the global extension of *mind*, but mind is a complex and chaotic phenomenon. Anyone who promised that the internet was going to release us from the oppressive mass manipulation of the *id* and the *superego* that we've lived under since the days of Edward Bernays and extend only the balanced *ego* was, purely and simply, lying to us. The same genomic mutation that released creative expression, intellectual ferment,

and serious debate also opened the door to reactionary close-mindedness, blatant ignorance and racism, flame wars, lies, and bullying.

In a similar vein, the internet represented the opportunity to expand one's social network beyond family, close friends, acquaintances, and work colleagues, to build relationships with people from other cities and countries, other cultures, other incomes and living conditions, other educational levels, other religious, spiritual, or philosophical traditions, and, as a consequence, offered opportunities for profound personal growth. But it also allowed people to form relationships *only* with others, until only recently hidden and anonymous, who shared their views, their biases and prejudices, their hatreds, and their ignorance. The consequence of this was to remove whatever social sanctions remained against the public exhibition of behaviors that were once widely (and I believe objectively) deemed *sociopathic*—a pathological absence of empathy for others, an absence of conscience (or a malformed conscience), the need to discriminate and dominate other groups, the lack of trust in others, the need to denigrate those who are different to buttress one's own damaged self-esteem. In other words, if the internet is the extension of human mind, then it is the extension of the *fullness* of mind on a mass scale—good, bad, and ugly.

No technology, and that includes technologies of communication, is morally neutral. Each technology has its own *purpose*, a specific role it was meant to play, an end it was designed to achieve. Each medium embodies a particular set of values, a particular agenda, a particular ideology. Our problem is that, beyond the purpose and function of any new technology, we cannot always anticipate what *other* purposes a tool can be used for, what *other* unanticipated (and frequently unwanted) ends it might achieve. The internet's agenda has proven to be to remove us from the shackles of controlled information, and more specifically, increasingly corporate-controlled information. Its agenda, in other words, has been to undo all the work of propaganda 2.0. Without understanding precisely what that means (in terms of information theory), and what it will mean for the future, it is unlikely that we will be able to anticipate the internet's role as a powerful generator of entropy, and an agent in the breakdown of propaganda 2.0. To the extent that the new information we encounter contributes in a meaningful way to the lived experience of human beings, we can say that we've learned from it. In this case, we have in propaganda 2.1 what appears to be a potentially powerful antidote to the mass manufactured, homogenized pablum of propaganda 2.0. However, to the extent that new information unleashed upon us is false or manipulative, or hateful and meant to incite passions, then we flounder and are lost. The internet gives us both the opportunity to learn and the threat of being duped. But unlike the corporate-controlled mass information environment