Introduction

This book was written as an addendum to Jacques Ellul's masterful socio-logical study *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. My purpose in writing it was to update and adjust the ideas found in that book for the twenty-first century. I labor under no delusion that I can improve on Ellul's work and in fact take the principles contained in his *Propaganda* as the foundation of all my investigations.

Ellul published the original French text *Propagandes* in 1962, and through its English translation Ellul was introduced to American readers back in 1965. Newspapers were still Americans' prime source of news. Tele-vision had only recently eclipsed radio and was well on its way to toppling the monopoly of knowledge established by newspapers centuries earlier. At the time of Ellul's death in 1994, the internet and World Wide Web were still in their infancy and their new technology spawns—smartphones, the mobile, cellular internet, social media, the cloud, etc.—were little more than techno-utopian fantasies. In the three decades since Ellul's death we've read about the inevitability of a "digital revolution" resulting from the decentral-ized information flow of digital technologies. The old-technology strangle-hold on information would be broken and individuals would be free to share new and revolutionary ideas; democracy would be revitalized as individuals could begin to write the political narratives most recently monopolized by highly paid consultants; corporations would lose power as the marketplace was recolonized by small businesses, etc. In the same way that the fall of Soviet communism was supposed to mark "the end of history," the digital revolution should have marked "the end of propaganda."

Today, however, it would be easy to think that the "revolution" has been nothing more than another example of what Ellul called "the technological

bluff." The primacy of technique in the digital age (and our internalization of the technological value system) has so far empowered the corporation as much as the individual; democracy, for a hopeful minority, appears revitalized, but the organized force of capital leaves true democracy in a virtual state of life support, rapidly approaching its demise; and the individual, for the most part, has approached digital technologies in exactly the same way he approached older technologies: with the fascination and enthusiasm of a passive receiver of mass-produced amusements and agonistic controversies du jour. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss . . .

Ellul lived to see none of this, of course, so his otherwise visionary *Propaganda* couldn't possibly anticipate the restructuring of the technical system and the redrawing of boundaries among our society's individuals, institutions, and centers of power. If my role in writing this book is not to improve Ellul's work (and it is not), then perhaps I can legitimately claim that its goal is to reinterpret it for a new century and to conform Ellul's analysis to the contours of our new digital landscape.

Propaganda affects everyone, every day, in just about every facet of our lives, and its effects are substantial and serious, whether we're aware of them or not. And most of us are not. The fact is that propaganda pervades our lives and the life of our society and it is inescapable. It suffuses every human social institution, from our politics, to our education systems, our religions and houses of worship, our economic affairs, and our interpersonal relationships—both actual and virtual. It permeates our conscious (and unconscious) minds, creating a "reality" that few will ever consider questioning publicly or privately, even though for many this "reality"—when seen objectively—seems utterly bereft of authentic human meaning. This is not entirely new. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," wrote Henry David Thoreau in 1854 about the burgeoning technological civilization. "What is called resignation is confirmed desperation . . . it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. *Yet they honestly think there is no choice left.*"[1] (My emphasis.) This inability to recognize our own freedom and power that Thoreau wrote of more than a century and a half ago has only increased in the intervening years, and increased exponentially with the development and spread of technology.

But wait—you're probably thinking—that doesn't sound like propaganda to me. Propaganda doesn't happen all the time, and when it does, I'm completely aware of it *because* I'm free. Propaganda consists of lies and manipulation and attempts at subversion. Propaganda is an evil act perpetrated

---

1. Thoreau, *Walden,* 4–5.

by a cabal of sinister agents—usually acting on behalf of a foreign power or competing ideology—with the intent of demoralizing us, weakening our faith in our own government or system, undermining our society and institutions, and destroying our way of life. Propaganda is recognizable precisely because it doesn't accurately reflect the reality that I, with my intelligence and free will, experience on a daily basis. Propaganda is recognizable because it goes against all the shared values, attitudes, and assumptions of our culture. Propaganda is un-American—as are those who engage in it.

Some of this might, in fact, be true—to a point. The problem, however, is that none of it is *entirely* true, and much of it is completely false. Few people recognize that in a highly technologically developed society such as ours, propaganda is a constant: it is *always* happening, and it is *everywhere*. Propaganda may be based on lies (Ellul tells us, by the way, that such propaganda is destined to fail in the long term), but to be effective it must be based on "facts." Propaganda is most certainly a form of manipulation; but we probably don't feel as though we're being manipulated when we're merely being reminded of the things and ideas we grew up with from childhood and already believe in. Propaganda may at times be evil. I would argue, along with Ellul, that while it is both a necessity and an inevitability, it is never an objective good. But in a highly technologically developed mass culture, it is most certainly a necessity, and the vast majority of us experience it (without calling or thinking about it as propaganda) as a good. Propaganda does indeed come to us from agents and agencies beyond our borders motivated by bad intentions. But the vast bulk of the propaganda experienced by citizens of the United States is domestically produced and distributed, and while we willingly, even gleefully, turn to it day after day, it still might not be a bad idea to question the intentions of its creators. Propaganda is *not* un-American. Propaganda is *the American way of life itself* because it is the way of mass technologies.

More than just the way things are, propaganda presents itself to us as the way things *ought to be*. A mass-manufactured reality that defines human needs and then delivers all of the material goods it defines is not to be taken lightly. If no one believes he is susceptible to propaganda it is because dominant establishment sources of information give us nothing that would call the status quo into question. Indeed, for that very reason no one *wants to believe* he is susceptible to propaganda. And that is precisely the evidence necessary to show the seriousness of the problem—and why I believe everyone needs to know about it.

*   *   *

For millennia, philosophers, scholars, and researchers have examined *messages*; the messages flowing through our societal systems of mass communication. The general thought was that messages were the key to persuasion. In one specific school of thought (rhetoric), people were trained how to argue persuasively, even in the absence of evidence to support one's claim; in another it was believed that if the right message hit the right person at the right time (something that mass media made more likely than interpersonal communication alone could do), that person could be expected to pass that message on to others, thereby creating a chain of persuasion that would inevitably result in, if not a consensus view, then certainly a majority one; yet another school of thought was more blunt: viewers, readers, and hearers of mass-mediated messages passively internalize those messages and are equally passively affected by them. In this view, it is as though some medium directly injects ideas into our heads. We become what we consume.

I will refer to these theories in the coming chapters and it is my hope to highlight what they got right as well as to critique what they might have missed or gotten entirely wrong. But our very concern for propaganda, our perception of its actions as lies, deceit, and manipulation through the use of cunningly crafted messages, blinds us to the real danger that it poses for us. Undue focus on messages distracts us from the fact that we live in an environment of mass propaganda each and every day of our lives with no possibility of escape, and few of us are aware of this fact; and when made aware enter a mode of deep and disdainful denial. When we focus on messages, we get the misleadingly comforting feeling that we know right from wrong, truth from falsehood, straightforward exposition of facts from manipulative spin and we immediately tell ourselves "I know the difference between truth and propaganda."

We tend to think, for the same reason, that we are immune to propaganda. We tell ourselves "Propaganda is manipulation, and I'm too strong to be manipulated." "Propaganda is brainwashing, and I'm too intelligent and strong-willed to be brainwashed." "Propaganda is a conspiracy of the powerful over the weak, and as a citizen of a democracy I have the power to fight propaganda." "Propaganda is lies and I can tell a lie from the truth." And so on.

What we fail to see, by such thinking, is that while the messages of propaganda are not without their own power and effectiveness, the real power of propaganda lies in the material superstructure of mass information itself, in its ability to conform the beliefs, values, attitudes, and especially behaviors of millions of people at a time, in its capacity for engendering and supporting the conception of reality we wake up to and accept in our daily lives. Our global system of mass communication is really nothing more

than an enormous and highly efficient (and profitable) "information pump," and its content—delivered to us through countless thousands of channels twenty-four hours each day, seven days a week, 365 days a year—is information, much of it organized into forms we call "messages," but a surprising proportion of it of questionable meaning or use. The point is that messages come, and messages go, and when we open the spigot to fill our cup with one message, there are more messages right behind. Our collective cup literally runneth over with messages. In an information environment like this, messages are essentially interchangeable, and no single message is that important or powerful. It is the *organization of the system*, and not the message, that holds the power. This is, for most people, however—and not just for the layman, but for scholars as well—a difficult concept to understand and even more difficult to accept. As Marshall McLuhan wrote in *Understanding Media*, "Political scientists have been quite unaware of the effects of media anywhere at any time, simply because nobody has been willing to study the personal and social effects of media apart from their 'content.'"[2] As a result of this culture-wide blind spot we tend to fall back on our understanding of propaganda as "messages we don't like."

So an unfortunate "natural" reaction to a book such as this is to say, simply, "It doesn't apply to me. I know propaganda when I see it. I don't need this book." Part of my task in writing it, then, is to persuade you that you do. I readily and willingly admit that this book is a straightforward work of *counterpropaganda*.

* * *

At its core, propaganda is about social control. It takes many forms, moves in many directions simultaneously, and is directed towards numerous ends. It may, for instance, be concerned with promoting and enforcing adherence to a particular set of values and standards of behavior, or it may be an attempt to subvert those values and standards and establish new social norms. It may be a celebration of unifying cultural myths, or it may present itself as an attempt to question the meaning of those myths, thereby diminishing their power. It may be a means of integrating new members of society (either immigrants or developing children) into the "legitimate" (i.e., dominant) culture, or it may be an attempt to delegitimize the dominant culture and to encourage the acceptance of "diversity"—diversity of language, customs, traditions, religions, etc., that have come to us from the outside. It may be focused on the control by a powerful elite of a weaker majority, or it may

2. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 281.

be concerned with weakening that control. And it may be concerned with spreading doubt, fear, and a sense of hopelessness in order to disengage the mass from the political process, or it may try to provide hope and a sense of empowerment. Whatever the case, "good" or "bad," "white propaganda" or "Black propaganda," it is always in its essence an attempt to either establish and defend a certain order and uniformity in society, or destroy them and impose a new order, in the face of the natural diversity—of thought, of attitude, of behavior—of a mass of millions of *individual* human beings. Propaganda is a tool of social control, a technological extension of *the social contract,* and effective propaganda is power.

As Carl von Clausewitz once said, war is simply politics by other means. I maintain that if you look at the relationship between propaganda and politics, propaganda is simply war by other, nonviolent (or, perhaps, less physically violent) means. And it is a form of war that government uses not just on some foreign "enemy," but on its own civilian population as well. Abandoning rifles and mortars and bombs, the commanders and foot soldiers of propaganda wage a form of war on their own citizens. Their ultimate purpose is the (usually peaceful) subjugation of the populace, a bending of the people's will to the imperatives of government, society, or economics. There may be no physical violence involved, but a different kind of violence arguably occurs: the subsuming of the individual will into that of the mass, and the alienation of the person from the self. This is not necessarily new, at least in principle; but in a highly technologically developed mass society it occurs on a new and much larger scale: *the scale of the mass.*

Our world today is one of global digital connections, of a free and unrestricted multidirectional information flow, of the many directly connected to the many, the one to the one, the one to the many, and of the many to the one. The decentralized, distributed network, we were told, was meant to break down the oppressive centralized network with its maximum information control and empower us—individual people—by providing us with a wealth of diverse information; all the information we really need to make informed decisions in our lives. The internet, by its very nature, appeared to many as a democratic medium and democratic processes should have flourished under its reign. It was meant to allow us *to govern ourselves.* Its pioneers envisioned the internet itself as a new sort of social contract.

They may have been wrong. But they could still be right.

* * *

There's another circumstance I should mention regarding my reasons for writing this book, and I believe it is a testimony to the continuing incisiveness of Ellul's analysis of propaganda in the technological society. If Ellul's model is correct (as I believe it is), then the political upheaval we've been witnessing over the last few years—culminating, disturbingly, in the election of Donald J. Trump to the US presidency—is strikingly explicable by poring over the text of his *Propaganda.*

When independent US senator Bernie Sanders announced his candidacy for the presidency on April 29, 2015, a surprising number of Americans were flush with excitement. I was one of them. I had been paying attention to Bernie's career since the 1980s when he was the mayor of Burlington, Vermont—at the time, the only popularly elected Democratic Socialist public official in the United States. Like the millions of Americans who have since come to know him and hear him speak on issues of American social and economic justice, I admired him and what he was doing in Burlington. His tenure saw the rejuvenating and "greening" of a city that had suffered postindustrial blight. He encouraged the growth of "the commons," fought against the socially divisive effects of "gentrification," and demanded *not* that business should bear the cost of supporting a "socialist paradise," but that it should recognize its central role in the economic life of a *community* and act responsibly in that role.

So, yes, I was excited when Bernie announced his candidacy. But *never in a million years* did I expect that he might win. There was too much at stake in this highly technologically developed society for its owners and controllers to risk, and they were simply not going to let it happen. Still, I never expected that his candidacy would generate the kind of excitement—not only on the left, but even in significant portions of the populist right—that I observed as I watched the primary process over the next sixteen months. My politics has always been far to the left of the American center; but compared with the politics of many of the European nations I am little more than a solid centrist. Since the "Reagan revolution" of the 1980s, I had assumed I was alone in my political and economic views, and following the hostile takeover of the Democratic Party by the neoliberal Democratic Leadership Council and the subsequent election of Bill Clinton to the presidency, my assumption was bolstered. I began to think of myself as a radical, even though I didn't feel particularly radical. Bernie's candidacy opened my eyes to the fact that there are countless millions of people in the United States who have the same political, social, and economic ideas I have.

This is where Ellul comes into the picture, and this is one of the things that motivated me to write this book. I propose that the years between 1980 and 2008 marked a high point in the development and spread of Ellul's

"technological society." Those (nearly) three decades saw the ascendancy of what Ellul calls "technique" to a position of unquestioned dominance. In the economic sphere, we witnessed the legitimation and spread of supply-side economic theory and the deregulation of business, first in the US, but soon globally. Government regulation of business, tampering as it does with the "invisible hand" of the free market, was inherently inefficient and had to stop. Markets govern themselves, and businesses must be allowed to succeed or fail on their own merit; this, of course, would have to include what we call "the labor market." Those who see free-market capitalism as a technique look at organized labor as an artificial, external, and alien attempt at regulation from outside the marketplace. This is an intolerable situation from the narrow perspective of capitalist technique. If you can work, you must work—for whatever wage your employer thinks appropriate. If you can't work, you're on your own. Welfare programs—another form of government interference in the market—are regressive, inefficient, discourage work, and create a "culture of dependency."

In the geopolitical sphere, we saw the collapse of Soviet Communism and the breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics into a "Commonwealth of Independent States." This had the dual effect of 1) "purifying," if you will, the technoculture by shifting the economy of nearly one-half billion people from a highly inefficient one (Communism) to an already efficient one, but one now rapidly increasing its efficiency (capitalism); and 2) freeing the technoculture from the last geopolitical impediment to expanding, unimpeded, to truly global proportions.

In the cultural sphere, we witnessed the rise of personal computing, the birth of the internet, the global proliferation of digital devices, the once unimaginable rapid movement of information—and capital—around the world, and the creation of an entirely new category of economic activity: e-commerce. We saw the beginning of "mash-up" culture, the weakening of copyright and intellectual property laws, personal, "on-demand" publishing, profit potential from viral videos, the rise of (or descent into) a "gig economy," and the growing dominance of "social media."

Following the fall of Communism, more or less simultaneous with the "digital revolution," we witnessed (once again in the economic sphere) the rise of a global "free market," nominally "regulated" by the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund; but regulated in a way that benefits the economic power of the technoculture rather than its people or the common good. We saw an increase in trade, an increase in global investment, but a decrease in any sort of barrier to efficiency in commerce that might exist in the form of national legislation; a global policy of