

# Propaganda and How to Recognize It

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## Keywords

band wagon, bandwagon, card stacking, conventional, enemy, extremist, glittering  
generality, group, groups, label, name calling, pejorative labels, plain folks,  
political, propaganda, rhetoric, technique, techniques, testimonial, transfer,  
us vs. them

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	2
1. Name-Calling .....	3
2. Glittering Generality .....	4
3. Transfer .....	4
4. Testimonial .....	5
5. Plain Folks .....	6
6. Card Stacking .....	6
7. Bandwagon .....	6
Insisting on a Binary Choice .....	7
Pejorative Labels .....	7
“extremist” .....	8
anti-intellectualism .....	9
Bibliography .....	10
Conclusions .....	11

## Introduction

Rhetoric is the art of persuading someone. Unless you live as a hermit, totally isolated from people, rhetoric is a vital skill. Propaganda is a subset of rhetoric, in which the speaker/writer attempts to manipulate the audience with emotion or fallacious reasoning.

A common theme in propaganda is the *us vs. them* posturing, in which the speaker/writer encourages you to join with reasonable people and oppose the enemy. The *us vs. them* posturing is particularly damaging to society, in that it is inherently divisive and erects barriers to working together to solve problems that affect everyone. In July 2005, I wrote a short essay with advice for students,<sup>1</sup> in which I condemned the human tendency to “think”<sup>2</sup> in terms of membership in groups, like a pack of wolves. About a week after writing that short essay, it suddenly occurred to me that most of the common propaganda techniques depended on group membership for their effect, and this essay quickly followed.

Propaganda is commonly found in speeches and writings of politicians and lawyers, as well as in advertising. In other words, propaganda is commonly used by experts in convincing people.

Because of propaganda’s appeal to emotion, use of fallacious reasoning, and appeal to membership in groups, propaganda appeals to an audience that is either *irrational* or *unthinking*.

The next seven sections discuss the classic propaganda techniques identified by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis during the years 1937-1942. In this discussion, I return continually to the basic theme that the intent of propaganda is to divide the world into two groups: *us* (i.e., the speaker/writer of the propaganda who is endorsing a product) and *them* (i.e., the enemy). When I say “product”, I mean the word to apply broadly to political candidates, legislative proposals, government policy, as well as tangible products in the marketplace. The audience is encouraged by propaganda to be one of *us*, and not one of *them*. Or, sarcastically, in the struggle between the us and them, us is better.

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<sup>1</sup> *Lessons That I Have Learned*, <http://www.rbs0.com/lessons.pdf> (July 2005).

<sup>2</sup> I put *think* inside quotation marks, because it is *not* genuine thinking to react automatically according to a group’s dogma.

## 1. Name-Calling

Name calling is such an ancient propaganda technique that it is frequently identified by its Latin name, *ad hominem* attack. For example, a politician who supports law-and-order could criticize his opponent as a “card-carrying ACLU member”. A politician who disagrees with a judge can label him/her as “a liberal activist judge”. The epithet can be emphasized by frequent, repeated use. For example, using the phrase “liberal activist judge” *every* time one refers to a judge will have some members of the audience wanting to lynch the judge by the end of the speech.

One particularly vicious example of name calling is to compare one’s opponent to Nazis.<sup>3</sup> In my opinion, such a comparison should never be used without specific reasons to support such a comparison. And even with specific reasons, such a comparison may be too inflammatory for rational discussion.

Another way to denigrate someone is to call them “unprofessional”. There can be no doubt about legitimate ethical codes promulgated by professional societies, and that behaving ethically (or professionally) is better than behaving *unethically* (or *unprofessionally*). However, I observe that the common use of the word “professional” is to compliment someone and the common use of the word “unprofessional” is to insult one’s opponent — neither of which common uses involve professional ethics, but are only name calling.

A politician sometimes denounces “special-interest groups”, which really means those interests are *not* the speaker’s interests. This criticism of “special-interests groups” is often more than name calling, the speaker seems offended that these “special interests” are allowed to participate in the political process.

Because of the strong negative connotation of the word “propaganda”, that word can be used in name calling: *we* give you information, *they* give you propaganda.

Sarcasm and ridicule often accompany name calling.

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<sup>3</sup> As I was writing the early drafts of this essay, I saw an editorial that criticized ethical discussions or health policy discussions that assert: “If X is done, then we are on the road to Nazi Germany.” Arthur L. Caplan, “Misusing the Nazi Analogy,” *Science*, Vol. 309, p. 535, 22 July 2005.

## 2. Glittering Generality

In name calling, one pastes a pejorative label on the enemy. In glittering generalities, one pastes a virtuous label on the desired product. There are many examples of words that are used as glittering generalities, such as mentions of

civilization, Christian, courage, democracy, dignity, duty, fairness, freedom, glory, good, heroes, honesty, honor, justice, liberty, love, loyal, patriot, peace, scientific, etc.

Each of these words has legitimate uses, but sprinkling them in text for emotional effect is propaganda. The legitimate use of these words is often to express a conclusion that is supported with reasons, while in propaganda these words express a mere assertion. The use of glittering generalities in propaganda is intentionally vague, so that the audience provides its own interpretation of these virtuous words.

A good example of glittering generality is to call our method “scientific”. For example, the study of government operations was formerly in a government department or civics class, but is now known as political science. As someone who was educated as a physicist, I look at so-called “political science” and say there is nothing scientific about it. A political scientist might reply that it is a “social science”, to distinguish it from the real sciences (e.g., physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology, and mathematics). This is all just a game with words. Calling something a science does *not* make it scientific.

Whenever I see food advertised as “all natural” or “100% organic” (more glittering generalities), I think to myself that feces are also “all natural” and I sure don’t want to eat them. <laughing> The Truth is that something that is produced in a chemical factory is often more pure than some product of nature.

## 3. Transfer

Another effective propaganda technique is to transfer the prestige, authority, or virtue of some group to the product that is being promoted. The common way to do the transfer is to prominently display a symbol (e.g., the U.S. flag) or to have an organization make an endorsement. By displaying a giant image of the U.S. flag, or hundreds of regular sized U.S. flags, an organization projects its image as that of genuine patriotic Americans. And its not just the Americans who do this — watching old movies shows that the Nazis routinely displayed large banners and flags too.

An effective propaganda technique is to include one or more victims (e.g., a child who suffers from some illness, a woman who was raped, etc.) at some public meeting and essentially invite (i.e., dare) one’s opponents to deny the entitlement of these victims a cure for their illness, or to deny the entitlement of these victims to justice, etc. Natural sympathy for the suffering of the

victim is transferred to a political issue. The presence of the victims is vividly emotional and precludes a rational discussion of a possible remedy for the problem.

One can use transfers in the other direction too. Guilt-by-association is the name for propaganda in which a person's reputation is destroyed by associating him with a bad group (e.g., Ku Klux Klan, Nazis, etc.).

One needs to be careful when advocates of some political position attempt to hijack a professional society, and have the professional society endorse a political position that is irrelevant (and unrelated) to the society's expertise. I remember back in the late 1960s, when opponents of the war in Vietnam tried to get the American Physical Society, a group of physicists engaged in scholarly scientific research, to condemn the war in Vietnam. There is no reason why the opinion of physicists on the Vietnam war should have any respect or credibility. Not *all* physicists opposed the Vietnam war. And advocating a position unrelated to physics was outside the scope and charter of the American Physical Society, indeed, it could be seen as a violation of their nonprofit status granted by the government. Such an endorsement would be propaganda, in that it attempts to transfer the intellectual prestige of physicists to a position on a political issue that was outside the professional competence and expertise of physicists.

#### 4. Testimonial

In both politics and advertising, one frequently sees a famous person (e.g., a movie actor or politician) endorse a candidate or product. The propaganda technique is to take someone who the audience "knows" and likes, and attempt to transfer the famous person's opinion to the audience. In the technique of transfer, discussed in the previous section of this essay, the favorable image of a group is transferred to a product, while in the technique of testimonial, the favorable image of an individual person is transferred to a product.

An alternative testimonial is to take a highly educated person (e.g., a physician, professor, scientist with Ph.D. after his name, etc.) and have that person endorse some candidate or product. Sometimes a testimonial includes frequent use of technical words and equations that the audience is *not* intended to understand, but are used to impress the audience with the alleged erudition of the highly educated person. The key to diagnosing propaganda is to recognize that, without *understanding the reasons* for a conclusion, the conclusion is just propaganda. One could use the propaganda technique of name calling to condemn these so-called professionals who are a stooge in such testimonials, because, like a whore, they sold their academic degree and professional credentials.

University administrators and learned professionals commonly say that a peer-reviewed paper published in an archival journal published by a professional society is more credible, or somehow more valuable, than the same paper posted on the author's website without peer review by a

professional society. Elsewhere, I have criticized this reliance on anonymous peer reviewers.<sup>4</sup> Here, I observe that giving higher credibility to published, peer-reviewed papers is akin to honoring the propaganda technique of transferring the prestige and authority of the publisher (i.e., professional society) to the paper itself. Authors who are personally familiar with the peer-review process know that such publication is *not* an endorsement of either the truth of the publication or the value of the publication.

In law, it is common to use long quotations from appellate court opinions, particularly opinions of the U.S. Supreme Court, to convince the reader. This is *not* propaganda. Law is made by judges, so quotations from those judges are the most authoritative way of stating the law, as well as stating the reasons for the law.

## 5. Plain Folks

Politicians attempt to present themselves as just ordinary citizens. Look at the first sentence of a political speech, in which the politician acknowledges the presence of dignitaries by rank or name, and then says "... and my fellow citizens," because the politician wants us to think that the politician is one of us.

It is the same for leaders of labor unions and professional societies, who attempt to present themselves as just ordinary members of the group.

## 6. Card Stacking

Card stacking refers to the selective presentation of only facts that are favorable to the desired conclusion, and the deliberate omission of facts that are unfavorable to the desired conclusion. The legal term for card stacking is *fraud*.

## 7. Bandwagon

The basic theme of the bandwagon is everyone else is buying the product, so you should too.

Most people prefer to be in the majority. There are at least two reasons why being in the majority is better: (1) the majority is the winner in elections, and the winner has political power, and (2) most people like to be conformists, rather than vulnerable to criticism for being different. An advertisement that suggests a particular product is widely used motivates nonusers to try that product, in order to be like other people.

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald B. Standler, *Evaluating Credibility of Information on the Internet*, <http://www.rbs0.com/credible.pdf> (May 2003).

A variation on the bandwagon propaganda technique is to suggest that the product will be the next big thing, and that by purchasing it now, one can be recognized as an early adopter who is ahead of the crowd. This is an intriguing twist on the conventional bandwagon, in that the audience is invited to be a minority who is ahead of the majority.

Mentions of “fringe groups” or “out of the mainstream” are propaganda that denigrates positions held by a minority of people. This propaganda invites the audience to stay with the majority on the bandwagon, instead of deserting the majority.

### **Insisting on a Binary Choice**

Another common propaganda technique is for the speaker/writer to insist that the audience make one of two choices: to join with us, or to join with the enemy:

“You are either with us or against us.”

“You are part of the solution or part of the problem.”

“You either oppose terrorism, or you support terrorism.”

Such a demand creates polarization, by dividing everyone into two camps, us vs. them.

Such a demand not only oversimplifies a complex issue and ignores a spectrum of possible choices, but also rudely insists that the audience choose now between one good choice and one bad choice. With some careful thought, one might find a better choice than what is offered by the speaker/writer. And, in some cases, it may be wise to do nothing, because a clumsy “solution” to one problem will make matters worse by creating new problems.

Such a demand is commonly used by religious zealots and political extremists, but once one learns to recognize this propaganda technique, one can find it in speeches and writings of mainstream politicians too.

### **Pejorative Labels**

A quick propaganda attack is accomplished by pasting one or more pejorative labels on someone. Such labels accomplish two functions: (1) they exclude the enemy from us, and (2) they put the enemy on the defensive. The first function is simply *us vs. them*, seeing people only as members of groups. The second function recognizes that it is cheaper and easier to attack than defend. It might take the enemy several pages of paper to explain *why* some pejorative label is *not* valid, and the attacker has no intention of letting the audience hear several pages of defense by the enemy. In short, such labels are *not* a fair fight, they are propaganda.

“extremist”

The speaker/writer labels the enemy as an “extremist”. We are moderate and in the majority. The enemy is an extremist, outside the boundary of acceptable behavior.

While I do not want to justify extremism — such justification is a hopelessly futile task — the Truth is that so-called extremists sometimes push for change in our beliefs when no one else has the courage to challenge conventional beliefs. Pasting an “extremist” label on someone invites the listener/reader to automatically ignore or condemn the so-called extremist. But the so-called extremist *might* have a message worth considering, particularly if the extremist label is only propaganda.

It takes a lot of courage for a creative scientist to publish a finding that some conventional belief is wrong and needs to be changed, but at least the scientist will have objective evidence from calculations or experiments to show that the proposed change better represents the actual behavior of Nature.

In the area of politics or religion, such rational reasons are more difficult to find, which makes it more difficult to change political or religious dogma. Looking at recent U.S. history, Dr. Jack Kevorkian, an eccentric retired physician in Michigan, forced mainstream society to confront the harshness of laws prohibiting all assisted suicides.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Kevorkian was a genuine extremist, who openly defied both the law and conventional medical ethics, daring prosecutors to convict him, and keeping the issue of physician-assisted suicide in the public consciousness. Unfortunately, after a series of early victories for Kevorkian and his cause, Kevorkian arrogantly represented himself in court, was convicted, and quickly disappeared from public consciousness. That may be the fate of most genuine extremists: to self-destruct and disappear, as a martyr to their cause.

Barry Goldwater openly embraced the extremist label in a speech accepting the Republican Party’s presidential nomination in the year 1964, when Goldwater announced that “I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.” Lyndon Johnson, his Democratic party opponent, easily convinced the American people that Goldwater was an extremist and a dangerous man. Goldwater received only 39% of the popular vote nationwide, making Goldwater the least popular presidential candidate in modern American history. Strangely, about 16 years later, Ronald Reagan was a popular candidate and two-term president, despite embracing many of Goldwater’s ideas, but without Goldwater’s extremist label. The defeat of Goldwater and the success of Reagan may be due to the fact that Reagan was an astute user of propaganda, while Goldwater was just bluntly honest and naive about the effects of labels.

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<sup>5</sup> See my essay, *Annotated Legal Cases on Physician-Assisted Suicide in the USA*, <http://www.rbs2.com/pas.pdf> (May 2005).



The use of the word “radical” in propaganda is similar to the use of the word “extremist”.

#### anti-intellectualism

Instead of honoring and respecting someone with superior intellectual accomplishments, conventional American practice seems to be to marginalize professors and other intellectuals. The common phrase “it’s only of academic interest” discards an idea without giving it genuine consideration, because the idea allegedly has no practical significance. Labeling a person an “ivory-tower idealist” suggests that person might have ideas, but is naive about political reality. And, finally, someone with genuinely superior academic credentials can be denigrated by calling him/her “arrogant”, putting him/her on the defensive for having devoted years of their life to earning those credentials, as if the credentials are shameful or embarrassing.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, people who have unusual intellectual ability and who make unconventional choices (e.g., prefer to write a computer program instead of attending a sporting event) get pejorative labels of “geek” or “nerd” pasted on them. While so-called “normal” people denigrate the geeks or nerds, the normal people *expect* that a geek or nerd will help them when their computer malfunctions.

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<sup>6</sup> To defeat this mode of attack, political candidates with doctoral degrees normally hide their education. Biographies of political candidates in the USA may list the name of the college(s) that granted their bachelor’s degree or law degree, but omit details about their major subject in undergraduate college, and avoid mentioning advanced degrees.

## Bibliography

Discussion of propaganda techniques is found in every college textbook on rhetoric. One can find many interesting articles on the Internet by using a search engine to search for propaganda techniques. The following is a short list of websites that I found on 29-30 July 2005.

<http://www.propagandacritic.com/> website of Prof. Aaron Delwiche of Trinity University.

<http://www.quackwatch.org/> frauds in health care website by Dr. Stephen Barrett

<http://academic.cuesta.edu/acasupp/AS/404.htm> *Recognizing Propaganda Techniques and Errors of Faulty Logic*, Cuesta College, San Luis Obispo County Community College District, California.

<http://www.santarosa.edu/~dpeterso/permanenthtml/PropagandaListFRAME.html> list of definitions, explanations, and examples of propaganda techniques by the Philosophy Department at Santa Rosa Junior College, Santa Rosa, California.

<http://www.sourcewatch.org/>

[http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Propaganda\\_techniques](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Propaganda_techniques) a long list of propaganda techniques

<http://www.greatdebate.info/tc/propaganda.html> another list of propaganda techniques.

<http://www.kent.ac.uk/history/centres/proparticles.html> List of links to propaganda by the School of History at the University of Kent.

<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/> German Propaganda Archive, maintained by Prof. Randall Bytwerk at Calvin College in Michigan. It is easier for Americans to analyze and discuss Nazi propaganda than for Americans to consider the propaganda of their own government, because everyone can agree that the Nazis were Evil.

The U.S. Army Field Manual 33-1 describes propaganda techniques, which they call "Psychological Operations" (PSYOP). Excerpts from this manual are posted at many websites, of which the following are examples:

<http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm33-1/index.html>

[http://www.constitution.org/col/propaganda\\_army.htm](http://www.constitution.org/col/propaganda_army.htm)

<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/fr/546409/posts>

copies of IPA works

The following links contain material written during 1937-1942 by members of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, a group in New York City that was sponsored by Edward Filene, the owner of a chain of department stores in New England.

<http://www.inference.phy.cam.ac.uk/sanjoy/teaching/reading-media/3/day3.pdf> terse list of propaganda techniques, excerpts from the famous book *Propaganda Analysis*, published in 1938 by Columbia University Press

<http://www.maebrussell.com/Articles%20and%20Notes/German%20Propaganda.html>  
*Propaganda Techniques of German Fascism.*

The following book is available in many libraries:

Alfred McLung Lee and Elizabeth Bryant Lee; *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, 1939

## Conclusions

Propaganda certainly has no place in scholarly writing by learned professionals.

An interesting question is to ask “Is it *always* wrong to use propaganda?” Perhaps propaganda is justified when it inspires people to do something Good. But that would be an application of “the end justifies the means”. And that justification shifts the moral problem to determining what is a good end. There is no clear line between acceptable rhetoric and propaganda, just a continuous range of persuasive techniques. I think we need to accept the fact that propaganda is an essential tool of leaders of people, lawyers, politicians, and advertisers, so propaganda is inevitable. I suggest that the real question is not whether to condemn those who use propaganda, but how to recognize propaganda and how to avoid being manipulated by propaganda.

Propaganda is ubiquitous. The way to defeat propaganda is *not* to accept automatically everything that one reads or hears, and to think critically. It is important to evaluate the credibility of information. It is essential to understand the *reasons* for making a decision, and not to follow propaganda. Avoid quick decisions, which might be motivated by propaganda.

Finally, I note that four propaganda techniques (i.e., transfer, plain folks, bandwagon, binary choice) explicitly appeal to membership in groups and pushes an *us. vs. them* mentality on the audience.

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