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The Ethics of Propaganda and the Propaganda of Ethics

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This chapter, the ethics of propaganda and the propaganda of ethics, explores shifting definitions of propaganda, noting contributions from diverse disciplines: political science, philosophy, social psychology, education, semantics, and communication theory. These definitions remind us that how we define propaganda most assuredly determines whether we perceive the enterprise to be ethical or unethical. This section of the chapter is followed by a consideration of the social psychology and semantics of propaganda, given the significance of belief systems and language behaviors in producing, consuming, and critically comprehending the phenomenon. Finally, the entire enterprise is redefined in a way that should inform further studies of this pervasive and oft-lamented component of modern society, in both mainstream and social media.

Several premises underlie the discussion:

Propaganda is inevitable in today’s media mix. It is not a question of “if” our society and its institutions engage in propaganda; it is rather a question of “how.” It is not just what the “bad guys” do; traditional and emerging media systems are perfectly honed to be agents of propaganda, with modern media audiences its willing recipients.

Propaganda has become problematic in part because the lines have blurred among the information, persuasion, and entertainment functions of traditional/legacy and social/emerging media. Implications for ethics are striking, for those who would be successful propagandists, those who would avoid being propagandists, and those who would care to be more sophisticated targets for and students of propaganda.

“Truthiness,” “fake news,” “disinformation,” “misinformation,” “info-ganda,” “alternative facts,” “post-truth,” “dog whistles,” “infomercials,” “advertisorials,” and “deep fake technology” are only a few of the many descriptors of contemporary propaganda (Epstein, 2019; Guarino, 2019; McIntyre, 2019; Pitts, 2019; Robinson, 2019; Swisher, 2019; Zakrzewski, 2019). Whether intended to be humorous or deadly serious, the terms describe a broad range of ways mainstream and social media blur the lines between truth and fiction. For instance, highly sophisticated computer imaging and artificial intelligence now make it possible to generate totally believable but completely fake stories—anathema in mainstream media, but not necessarily in social media.