Handout 1: Propaganda Techniques

Assertion
An assertion states a debatable idea as fact with no explanation or reasoning. Assertion relies on the idea that we are gullible and will believe what we are told.

Example 1: A woman’s place is in the home.
Example 2: The most popular brand of toothpaste is...

Transfer
Transfer encourages people to transfer feelings associated with one idea, symbol or person to another.

Example: A singer addresses negative comments that she made about religion while signing autographs at a church.

Testimonials
This form of propaganda uses people we tend to trust to promote an idea or product as reliable.

Example 1: An Olympic gold medalist claims that she eats Cornflakes every morning.
Example 2: A famous singer claims that Proactive completely cleared up her acne.
Example 3: An actor promotes a charity.
Glittering Generalities
Glittering generalities are appealing but vague words that often appear in propaganda. Words frequently used in such ads include freedom, liberty, security, prosperity, equality, strength, choice, change.

Example 1: Americans will always fight for liberty.
Example 2: Orange Cola: Made from the best ingredients on earth!

Bandwagon
The bandwagon technique appeals to an individual to become a part of a crowd. It states that an individual should join in because others have already done so.

Example 1: Five million members and growing!
Example 2: Thousands of satisfied customers can’t be wrong!
Example 3: Everybody’s doing it!
Example 4: Join the digital revolution.
Example 5: Dentists agree that Listerine can replace flossing.
**Plain Folks**

People usually do not trust those they see as outsiders. The plain folks technique takes advantage of this instinct. The propagandist makes himself look like an insider to gain public confidence.

Example 1: Together we stand!
Example 2: Former President Bill Clinton ate at McDonald’s, played the saxophone on a late-night talk show and admitted he enjoyed trashy spy novels.
Example 3: A politician wears converse and jeans in an attempt to look like the average citizen.

**Name Calling**

Name calling is the use of negative words to signify an enemy or opposing view. Insulting words are used instead of logical reasoning and appeal to emotions.

Example: Jap, you’re next!
Other words that could be used: Jackass, pig, etc.

**Pinpointing the Enemy (Scapegoating)**

Propagandists often oversimplify complex problems by pinpointing a single cause or single enemy to blame. This is also called scapegoating.

Example 1: The reason there are so many people unemployed in America is because of Barack Obama!
Example 2: McDonald’s is the reason for obesity in America.
Card Stacking
Card stacking gives an unfair advantage to one point of view, while presenting the counterpoint weakly, if at all.

Example 1: Travel? Adventure? Join the Marines!
Example 2: A pharmaceutical company wants to test a new drug and advertises its need for volunteers to participate in the study. The advertisement emphasizes the benefits of participating in the study. The drug’s possible side effects are mentioned in passing in a speedy voiceover at the end of the commercial.

False Dilemma
A false dilemma reduces a difficult or complex argument to a small number of alternatives and concludes that one option is the best. There are usually many possibilities that are not discussed.

Example 1: One product always works and the other never works.
Example 2: You are either an ally or an enemy.
Example 3: If you aren’t using White Bright Detergent, your clothes are not clean.
Example 4: Either you agree with us or you are a fool.

Lesser of Two Evils
While most false dilemmas offer a “good” and a “bad” alternative, the lesser of two evils offers two “bad” alternatives. This technique is used when the propagandist is trying to convince people to support a perspective they would otherwise be wary of accepting.

Example 1: Try living under a terrorist regime!
Example 2: Senator Williams may have lied under oath, but at least he never embezzled money, like his opponent did.
You don’t get rich writing science fiction. If you want to get rich, you start a religion”
– L. Ron Hubbard, creator of Scientology

Propaganda is a part of our daily lives. It is present on billboards, buildings, television and magazines as well as in political campaigns. It is estimated that the average person is exposed to as many as 5000 advertisements a day.¹ For this reason, it is essential that we become active participants of society and take the time to understand and deconstruct the world around us.

Assignment

1. Choose an advertisement or piece of propaganda from the past or present. Make sure that the piece you have chosen has used at least three advertising or propaganda techniques.

2. Strip the advertisement of its manipulative strategies and list them.

3. Create a collage based on each strategy. Use images, words and colours that you associate with each strategy. This will be a personal collage that exposes each strategy for what it is.

4. Write a concluding paragraph that answers the following questions: What is left when all propaganda and advertising techniques are stripped away? How does this help you to critically consume media?

Introduction: Piece of propaganda/advertisement to be deconstructed

Propaganda Technique 1:
Words, colours and photos that represent technique in your eyes:

Propaganda Technique 2:
Words, colours and photos that represent technique in your eyes:

Propaganda Technique 3:
Words, colours and photos that represent technique in your eyes:

Conclusion: What is left when all propaganda and advertising techniques are stripped away? How does this help you to critically consume media?