

Propaganda Techniques

Propaganda techniques appeal more to your emotions than to common sense or logic. Like persuasive techniques, they are used to convince you to think, feel, or act a certain way. The difference is that a **propagandist**, a person who uses propaganda techniques, does not want you to think critically about the message.

For example, when you hear the name of a product or see its logo associated with your favorite football team, your excitement for that team is being used to sell that product. If you connect your excitement about the team with the product enough times, this propaganda technique, known as **transfer**, may eventually persuade you to buy the product. Your decision would be based not on logical reasons for buying the product but on your emotional response to the propaganda technique.

The following chart gives definitions and examples of other common propaganda techniques found in television ads and programs. As you watch TV, look for the given clues to identify these techniques in every kind of programming you watch.

PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES USED ON TELEVISION		
Techniques	Clues	Examples
Bandwagon tries to convince you to do something or believe something because everyone else does.	Listen for slogans that use the words <i>everyone, everybody, all</i> , or in some cases, <i>nobody</i> .	While being interviewed on a talk show, an author might encourage viewers to join the thousands of other people who have benefited from his new diet book.
Loaded language uses words with strongly positive or negative meanings.	Listen for strongly positive or negative words, such as <i>perfect</i> or <i>terrible</i> .	<i>Wake-up Juice is a fantastic way to start your day!</i>
Product placement uses brand-name products as part of the scenery. The products' companies may pay producers for this seemingly unintended advertising.	As you watch TV, keep your eyes peeled for clearly visible brand names. Ask yourself if the brand names have anything to do with the plot of the show.	In the middle of a TV movie, an actor may drink a bottle of juice. The juice is not an important part of the plot, but the brand name of the juice is clearly visible.
Snob appeal suggests that a viewer can be special or part of a special group if he or she agrees with an idea or buys a product.	Listen for words, such as <i>exclusive, best, or quality</i> . Look for images of wealth, such as big houses, expensive cars, and fancy boats.	<i>Treat your cat like a queen; give her the cat food preferred exclusively by discriminating cats.</i>

Symbols associate the power and meaning of a cultural symbol with a product or idea.	Look for flags, team mascots, state flowers, or any other symbol that people view with pride.	A political candidate might use a national flag as a backdrop for a speech on TV.
Testimonials use knowledgeable or famous people to endorse a product or idea.	Look for famous actors, athletes, politicians, and experts. Listen for their names or titles as well.	TV star Zen Williams actively supports alternative energy research--shouldn't you?

False and Misleading Information

Are You Sure About That?

As mentioned earlier, a propagandist counts on you to be led by your emotions and not by your intelligence. Even if you wanted to think critically about a propagandist's message, you would not have much to go on because propaganda is so strongly **biased**. That is, it favors one point of view and ignores information that supports another point of view.

However, any persuasive message can be misleading, not just those containing the propaganda techniques listed [in the chart above]. Here are some signals that a persuasive message contains misleading information.

Presenting Opinions as Facts

Opinions are beliefs, judgments, or claims that cannot be tested and proved true. Watch out for opinions presented as if they were facts. For example, a news report may quote an expert who says, "Space exploration is necessary for the future of human survival." How could such a statement be proved? Opinions presented as facts, and not supported with evidence, can be misleading.

Missing Information

A persuasive message may downplay or leave out negative information. For example, car commercials often downplay the high price of the car. Instead, the commercials focus on the comfort, design, speed, and other positive features of the car. Information on pricing is usually included in small print or announced very quickly at the end of the commercial. As you watch TV, ask yourself, "What is missing? What facts or points of view are not being included?"

The Moon is Made of Green Cheese

While some persuasive messages may include misleading information, others may present falsehoods as if they were true. This type of information may sound perfectly logical, so it is much more difficult to detect than other propaganda techniques. For example, a talk show guest promoting his diet book might say, "With other plans, ninety percent of people gain back at least three-fourths of the weight they lost." This might sound convincing, but because it would be difficult to track down these statistics, and because the speaker is trying to sell his own book, you should have a few doubts.

To avoid believing false information, consider the source of any fact or statistic. An authoritative source such as a respected research institution—for example, the Smithsonian Institution—probably provides accurate facts. If the information comes from a source you suspect may be strongly biased—for example, an oil company providing information that “proves” environmental regulations don’t work—look for a more reliable source that can confirm the facts before you accept them.