

Responding To Propaganda: An Ethical Enterprise

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□ *By virtue of its epistemic deficits, propaganda is very much an unethical phenomenon. Coping effectively with propaganda requires a communicative response that confronts its inherent unethicity with ethically grounded resistance. In this article, I propose two congruent plans of communicative action, each of which rests on an apparent ethical connection: J. Michael Sproule's (1994) reclaiming of classical eloquence, and Jonathan Rauch's (1993) provocative program of "liberal science."*

Toward the end of his article in this issue, Jay Black (2001) identified a number of recurrent motifs that show up in the definitions of propaganda. These include an undue reliance on authority figures and spokespersons; the use of abstract language that does not lend itself to empirical validation; a panoply of simplistic thinking and reductionistic language in representations of people, institutions, and situations; and an inordinate preoccupation with conflict. Although Black opted to consider propaganda in less value-laden terms as an approach that saves us from indicting too much of our overall communication enterprise, I submit that an alternative judgment about the ethics of propaganda also needs to be considered.

I argue, less permissively, that undue reliance on authorities; the practice of applying abstract and unverifiable language; simplistic portrayals of people, institutions, and situations—all these are themselves forms of defective action that work against communication. So the flaws itemized by Black (2001) are neither innocent nor ethically indifferent. Indeed, the trouble with the neutralist approaches to propaganda and mass persuasion, so evident in most social science treatments, is that they tend to hide or to minimize the manifold epistemological deficiencies and unethical aspects of propaganda.

Thanks to the work of theorists such as Ellul (1957, 1962/1973) and Combs and Nimmo (1993), we now understand that propaganda is a far more diversified and complex phenomenon than just uttering lies and the slick manipulation of beliefs and language. These evident sorts of maneuvers, along with their assorted psychological effects, are just the tip of the

iceberg. More radical disorders are at work. Propaganda comprises a whole family of epistemic disservices abetted mostly (but not entirely) by the media: It poses as genuine information and knowledge when, in fact, it generates little more than ungrounded belief and tenacious convictions; it prefers credibility, actual belief states, and mere impressions to knowledge; it supplies ersatz assurances and certainties; it skews perceptions; it systematically disregards superior epistemic values such as truth, understanding, and knowledge; and it discourages reasoning and a healthy respect for rigor, evidence, and procedural safeguards. In sum, what really defines propaganda is its utter indifference to superior epistemic values and their safeguards in both the propagandist and the propagandee. Moreover, these epistemic disorders immediately situate the whole propaganda process as an unethical state of affairs.

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The case has been argued elsewhere (Cunningham, 1993; Marlin, 1989) that propaganda is not ethically neutral. The truth in what we say, and the virtue of truthfulness in speakers—that is, a firm disposition to utter a true statement—have traditionally been regarded as premier moral qualities. Accordingly, propaganda's widespread mishandling of crucial epistemic values translates into immediate ethical significance. To disregard truth values (honesty or truthfulness, accuracy, reality, canons of evidence, investigative protocols, and safeguards) in situations where they are expected, and to abuse them as in the case of distortion or the misuse of information, is to engage in unethical conduct. To elevate lesser epistemic values such as mere attention, credibility, belief, and ungrounded certainty above the higher imperatives of accuracy, knowledge, and sound reasoning is to unseat that which should prevail in informative and descriptive discourse (cf. Postman, 1985). At the same time, to allow and to tolerate these kinds of inversions works against taking personal responsibility (within the limits of our ability and opportunities) for our own states of understanding and ignorance.

It seems like an exaggeration to claim that propaganda robs us of our freedom and turn us into automatons, yet it certainly sets impediments in our way, thereby inhibiting our capacity to know and to act well. Propaganda, that is, impairs the quality of willingness or voluntariness in our active life such that had we been informed otherwise, we could have, we might have, or would have judged, spoken, or voted otherwise. Moreover,

in as much as propaganda practices (e.g., flawed reportage, negative political advertising) directly reduce the quality of democracy, it thereby erodes in manifold ways the primordial ethical values of justice and equity on which democracy rests (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; A. Carey, 1997).

In sum, propaganda is anything but ethically neutral. Rather, propaganda is very much a determinate social phenomenon such that its deep-structured epistemic and ethical deficits become the constitutive conditions that bring it into existence. This fact, I submit, becomes important in charting ways to deal with propaganda: To cope effectively with propaganda requires a response that confronts its inherent unethicity with ethically informed communication.

Reclaiming the Public Communication Sector

Now, because propaganda is a social phenomenon that poses as communication and exploits communication resources, I believe this points us in the direction we need to take: The most effective way in which to respond to propaganda is to establish a program of appropriate communicative action. I use the word *action* advisedly. It is not just enough to think about and analyze propaganda, to be aware of it, and to lament its ubiquity. Rather, we need to do something about it. We need, that is, to move out of the passive into the active zone; and the active in this case is nothing less than the business of ethically attuned public discourse within what is now regularly called the “age” and the “century of propaganda” (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991; Wilke, 1998, pp. 1–2).

I have in mind two congruent plans of communicative action each of which rests on an apparent ethical connection: J. Michael Sproule’s (1994) reclaiming an ancient rhetorical concept and Jonathan Rauch’s (1993) provocative program of liberal science. Sproule (1994) urged a historic conception of eloquence as a necessary antidote to the lifeless and impoverished political propaganda of today. I view Rauch’s analysis of liberal science as an elaboration of the argumentative and ethical virtuosity at work in the eloquence enterprise. My argument in this article, as it moves through the arguments of Sproule and Rauch, frames itself as an elaboration in which it becomes increasingly evident that responding to propaganda is necessarily and unavoidably an ethical enterprise.

Responding to Propaganda Through Eloquence

One of the more striking responses to propaganda is that proposed by Sproule (1994) in the concluding chapter of his *Channels of Propaganda* (pp. 327–356) when he urged a return to the classical value of eloquence. Sproule reminded us that the dominant educational remedy taught in U.S.

schools and colleges since the 1940s has been the “critical thinking” approach. Under the early influence of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (1937–1942) and its bulletins, propaganda analysis usually became synonymous with detecting seven common propaganda devices or fallacies: for example, name calling, glittering generalities, card stacking, and so forth (Sproule, 1997, pp. 129–137). The result, according to Sproule (1994), was that the early analysts neglected the larger social context, including leading corporate propagandists (e.g., private energy companies, governments, lobby and political action groups), self-serving objectives, and the co-optation of major channels. Sproule’s (1994) point was that when text-based analysis is too narrowly focused it misses out on the broader, nondiscursive features of manipulation.

Sproule (1994) offered three arguments (pp. 334–335) to bolster his position. First, detecting propaganda through critical thinking and assorted linguistic devices works satisfactorily with well-defined utterances such as speeches, advertisements, and announcements, but it is much less successful when the manipulative intent is extended and “buried in the practices and formulae of journalism, research, education, and entertainment” (p. 334). It is easy to overlook manipulative appeal when it is embedded within press relations practices or the allure of promilitary entertainment such as, say, the film *Top Gun*. Second, fine-tuned text analysis may blind the analysts themselves to the propaganda of social groups and organizations whom they favor or with whom they share an ideology. Groups within the educational sector are just as susceptible to this kind of unwitting complicity. J. W. Carey (1989), for instance, pointed out that in the 1930s when propaganda analysis was not always able to maintain critical detachment, some of the early progressive analysts “used propaganda analysis to propagate another piece of propaganda” (p. 279). Finally, Sproule (1994) argued, linguistic devices analysis may distract us from recognizing the “wider social reality of which these expressions are but a small part” (p. 335). Losing sight of the relation between the part and the whole misleads us, and seriously weakens the investigative enterprise itself. “[P]ropaganda analysis,” Sproule (1994) insisted, “requires the scrutiny of the discursive context more than of individual texts” (p. 335). The point is convincingly substantiated by the weight of scholarship (A. Carey, 1997; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Parenti, 1993).

Although journalism and education assist us as antipropaganda resources, our real challenge is to restore the public sphere by reclaiming participation in political debate and action. To this end, Sproule (1994) advocated the broad enterprise of “revitalizing rhetorical tradition” (p. 339) and “restoring eloquent speechmaking” (p. 339) that, he added, signifies “merging the practitioner and progressivist points of view” (p.

339) that defined so many of the original and earliest responses to propaganda in the 1930s. It marks, that is, a return to the classical idea of eloquence that Sproule (1994) called “a *kind of communication* [italics added] that draws upon great ideas, passionate commitment, and the highest values of a society or culture” (p. 340). A climate of eloquence, Sproule (1994) argued, “*incapacitates propaganda*” (p. 340, italics added) because it encourages speakers or advocates to harness their ideas to the aspirations of citizens; this, in turn, energizes otherwise passive audiences. Eloquence neutralizes propaganda-induced passivity in other ways, too: It “dissolves the power of unsupported conclusions by inculcating an appreciation for reasons,” and it “negates the power of visual images by forcing people to think about society as well as to watch fragments of it on TV” (Sproule, 1994, p. 340).

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Sproule’s (1994) concept of eloquence stands in stark contrast to what he characterized as the “impoverished,” “ghost written” speechmaking of today—“disembodied discourse ... pseudo-eloquence [that] lacks every ingredient of eloquence” (p. 343). Eloquence, on the other hand, is a complex armament of speaking and reasoning skills, passionate commitment, and a dedication to “the highest values of the society rather than lower-level appeals to hate, fear, or self-assertion” (Sproule, 1994, p. 343). Sproule’s (1994) spirited advocacy, then, was an invitation to restore the elements of argument, engagement, and accountability to public and political discourse whose eclipse Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1992) lamented, for example, in the 1988 presidential election (pp. 203–236). By contrast, eloquence is a mode of communication that engages the whole person—speaker and listener—through an integration of values, reason, and passion aligned thereto. By virtue of its sensitivity to a range of moral and epistemic values, it constitutes a profoundly moral response to the triviality and expediency that characterizes today’s propaganda.

Although he did not single out Cicero, Sproule’s (1994) antipropagandist respondent resurrects the Ciceronian ideal of the consummate rhetor in whom wisdom, probity, and rhetorical mastery inform each other. That integration of these value-laden skills is called *eloquence*. In the *De Oratore, Book III* (1960, #55–#56, pp. 43–45), Cicero stressed its alliance with the moral virtues. Indeed, “eloquence is one of the supreme virtues” (*Est enim eloquentia una quaedam de summis virtutibus*, p. 43), and he

called it “supreme wisdom” (*summa prudentia, sapientia*, p. 43–45). Nor is Cicero’s an isolated testimony. There are later echoes in Seneca and Quintilian, and we can find even earlier statements of this theme in Aristotle’s original view of rhetoric as ethically grounded discourse (Johnstone, 1980; Thorp, 1993). The less explicit motif I also underscore here is that the original theorists of rhetoric never labored under the fact-value shibboleth that has dominated social science thinking throughout the 20th century. The ancients would have been puzzled, even appalled by the kind of divisions that we have allowed to intrude between public discourse and moral habitudes. As part of responding to the culture of mass persuasion and propaganda, then, we need to reconsider both the ethical realism and the unabashed moral engagement that lay behind that earlier mind-set.

Responding to Propaganda through “Liberal Science”

In *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought* (1993), Rauch supplied a compelling supplement to Sproule’s (1994) concept of eloquence. In the concluding lines of this work, Rauch stated, “What hurts us is not wrong-thinking people but propaganda and ignorance; and unfettered criticism—liberal science—is the cure, not the disease” (p. 162). Rauch’s monograph is a thoughtful response to ostensibly well-intentioned attempts to silence offensive speech in the name of compassion and sensitivity for groups, usually minorities. The offending speech in question covers a wide range of hate and racist mongering, gender insults, and gay bashing—virtually any kind of inflammatory epithet and discriminatory utterance.

Rauch’s (1993) remarks, then, are directly relevant to the issue of developing an ethical response to propaganda. First, offensive speech has long been recognized as a form of propaganda: “Hate propaganda,” after all, is one of its standard categories. Second, offensive speech acts (including degrading language, stereotypes, visuals, and racist history) are forms of symbolic inducement that influence beliefs, feelings, and behavior. Third, in reacting to offensive speech, organizations (including the courts, school boards, and universities) have often formulated policies and engaged in practices that are themselves indistinguishable from propaganda techniques: censorship; regulations and codes that restrict speech freedoms; legislating (in)correct speech usage; inducing climates of uneasiness that inhibit free expression; and the imposition of spurious equivalence (e.g., creationism in science texts, epistemological relativism).

Although freedom of speech is legally assured within our democracy, the central issue for Rauch (1993) was “What should be society’s principle for raising and settling differences of opinion?” (p. 5). Rauch understood

that the metalegal choice we face is unavoidably epistemological, moral, and political. With a keen historical grasp of legal and philosophical developments, he enumerated (p. 6) five major contenders, four of which constitute serious threats to healthy rationality and its free expression. These four range from the elitism of fundamentalism whose sanctions are based on the authority of its leaders and their brand of scripture, to “Simple Egalitarianism” (“all sincere persons’ beliefs have equal claims to respect”) to the “Radical Egalitarian Principle” whereby “the beliefs of persons in historically oppressed classes or groups get special consideration” (p. 6). Rauch believed that only the fifth principle, that of liberal science, is acceptable, but in today’s society it is increasingly in a state of siege.

The most insidious challenge to free speech, however, is the “humanitarian threat” whose central tenet is “allow no pain to be caused” (Rauch, 1993, p. 122). In point of fact, at the heart of the humanitarian threat there are really two fallacious principles that coalesce: (a) the high-minded principle that speech-generated offenses are inherently wrong, and (b) each individual’s sincerely held opinions carry equal weight; and so this credo of political equality graduates into being the criterion of truth, knowledge, science, and teachability. In some quarters (e.g., college campuses), these principles have taken on the status of imperatives such that certain forms of speech are prohibited and subject to severe sanctions (Hentoff, 1993).

In opposition to all this, Rauch (1993) posited liberal science or “unfettered criticism” as the only defensible alternative. Rauch’s (1993) choice of principles is backed up by a developed theory of knowledge, undergirded in turn by a profoundly ethical vision of communication. Consider first the epistemology of liberal science. Liberal science is not a body of certitudes, nor is it anything like a mechanical accumulation of facts and apodictic laws. Rather, it is “a society, an ecology” (Rauch, 1994, p. 58) in which “the desire to find error, to find new beliefs which correct the inadequacies of old ones” (p. 65) are ever bit as important as the discovery of truths. Inspired by C. S. Peirce, Rauch (1993) said we are “a community of people looking for each other’s mistakes” (p. 63). In such a society, certitude and the satisfaction of personal certainty cede right of way to scepticism, the quest to challenge all opinions and beliefs, thereby nudging some of them closer and closer to a state of truth or knowledge. More than once, Rauch quoted Plato’s dictum that “belief without knowledge is an ugly thing, and that there is always an element of blindness in ungrounded opinions” (Plato, 1945, pp. 216–217 [505–506]). Ultimately, it is the dialectic of open discussion that filters out weak and unsupportable opinions, and confirms others as knowledge—subject always, of course, to later revision.

Rauch’s (1993) concept of liberal science, then, is an “evolutionary epistemology [in which] hypotheses and ideas evolve as they compete under

pressure from criticism, with intellectual diversity providing the raw material for change" (p. 58). Knowledge is not private or privileged glimpses. Rather, it is a social product, a product of what Rauch (1993) called "the knowledge industry" and "the reality industry" (p. 38), names for the community of scholars and critics who sustain the dialectic. Two rules dominate the discourse within this community and provide its "epistemological constitution" (p. 76):

1. No one gets the final say, which means that, in principle, all knowledge is revisable and therefore uncertain.
2. No one has personal authority. This is not an assault on expertise and credentials, but rather the recognition that the method of (in)validating claims should produce the same results when exercised by others, regardless of personal identity or reputations. (Rauch, 1993, pp. 46–50)

The name *liberal science*, then, paraphrases a social philosophy of truth that defines itself not as a body of unchanging truths, nor by mere consensus and agreement, but primarily as "a self-organizing swirl of disagreements" (Rauch, 1993, p. 73). Rauch thought that "it is very good at resolving conflicts" and, in the same breath, gleefully conceded that it is "very good at not resolving conflicts" (p. 73). Its power of dialectic, then, is boundless, the social conversation open ended—even if the language is sometimes offensive, the sentiments painful, and the ideas unwelcome.

Accordingly, liberal science is both an epistemology and an ethic. "Taking seriously the idea that we might be wrong," Rauch (1993) told us, "is ... an intellectual style, an attitude or ethic" (p. 45). Elsewhere he called liberal science's dominant principles ("No Final Say", "No Personal Authority") "moral commandments, ethical ideals" (pp. 75–76). As with Kant's categorical imperative, liberal science empowers each of us as an enfranchised participant and critic with the same moral entitlement to question, to seek out the errors in others' speech and, of course, to be wrong (Rauch, 1993, p. 53). To say all that is to say something very different from saying that X's opinion is every bit as valid or defensible as Y's because what has now been added is openness to unflinching review and evaluation of everything we say, and ownership of our own fallibility. It's important, too, to realize that we should not view Rauch's foundational ethical imperatives as infallible truths or content principles that reflexively exempt themselves from review. Rather, these imperatives stand as directives, procedures by virtue of which the enterprise of public discourse is inherently ethical.

In all of this, Rauch (1993) added, we should not even pretend to eliminate bias or prejudice but only to channel it and to hold it in check through the diversity of others' arguments. With obvious resonances to J. S. Mill's

On Liberty and Milton's *Areopagitica*, Rauch even celebrated the presence of bias, prejudice, and "inspired error" in society because it promotes debate: "It is a positive good to have among us some racists and anti-Semites, some Christian-haters and some rabid fundamentalists" (p. 68). Such an inclusive society "pits people's prejudices against each other. Then it sits back and watches knowledge evolve" (p. 68). Even though Rauch's liberal science allows for the insolence of the street fighter, it remains unwaveringly committed to its own defining rules of engagement: No speaker or opinion is special, and no belief or principle is infallible.

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Conclusions

Propaganda, with all its protean variety, its lurking interlinear presence, and slick visual appeal demands a special repertoire of communication talents to recognize and respond to it. Confronting it for what it is requires a complex habitude, which combines moral vision, critical reasoning, and communication skills, and a solid base of virtuous attachments. Sproule's (1994) reclaimed concept of eloquence, I argue, nominates the "kind of communication" needed to neutralize the pseudocommunication of propaganda. Rauch's (1993) liberal science, at the same time as it spells out the conversational tenacity needed in public discourse, also magnifies the moral engagement that lies at the heart of eloquence. The result would be a quality of public discourse, a communication ethic, that effectively addresses and exposes the climate of propaganda within which multitudes of symbolic inducements parade as gratifying "communication" to an otherwise unresisting public. In tandem, I argue, Sproule and Rauch supply us with a blueprint for this kind of principled response.

Note

1. Copyright of this article has been retained by the author.

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