

Media whores and propaganda

ONE of the basic rules of propaganda states that the propagandist must maintain invisibility. Propaganda can appear as news, music, art, film, pageantry or even in the form of architecture – but it should never appear as *propaganda*. The reason is simple: If the true identity of the propagandist is exposed, the propaganda is less effective. Ideas crafted to resonate with the target audience, and presented by third party proxies such as journalists, are far more effective than partisan pronouncements.

The propagandistic message doesn't have to be grounded in reality. It doesn't have to be based on truths or facts. It just needs to be repeated continuously until it sinks in. Adolf Hitler, in his book "Mein Kampf," argued that with sufficient repetition, and with an understanding of mass psychology, it would be quite possible to prove to the public that a square is a circle. Hitler argued that propaganda should appeal to emotions rather than intellect. It should present only one side of an argument. And it should keep its message simple, but in constant repetition.

Following this model, it's conceivably possible for the Bush administration to convince the American public, for instance, that the Social Security system is facing impending insolvency. The message plays to our fears. And it is repeated ad nauseam throughout a wide array of media channels ranging from talk radio's windbags to PBS's think tank policy wonks. Lost in this onslaught is the fact that the government's own economists predict full solvency until at least 2042 (the Congressional Budget Office predicts solvency through 2052). And that if the payroll cap was lifted and the wealthy paid into

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the system at the same rate as the poor and middle classes, the system would have a healthy surplus throughout the next century.

I don't want to get sidetracked here into an argument over Social Security privatization – but the plan to dump the nation's retirement equity into the stock market is akin to just placing the whole multi-trillion dollar wad on the number 31, taking a swig of cheap scotch, and spinning the hell out of the roulette wheel. In this case, the house is the likely winner. With Bush's Social Security plan, it's the stock market, and ultimately corporate coffers, that win as the sagging market is bolstered with our forced contributions. The plan is a weird play on communism, where the people own the corporations, but where the corporations ultimately control the people. The end result will be a short-lived crack high for Wall Street – followed by generations of destitute retirees.

Lies as truths

This is a tough sell, but the Bush administration propaganda methodology is now tried and tested. It's how the Bushites sold the Iraq War. There were lots of wild and unsubstantiated claims about Weapons of Mass Destruction and fear mongering talk of an imminent danger. The alternative media debunked this myth, but they lack a mass audience. The mass media, on the other hand, led by venerable stalwarts of supposed liberalism such as The New York Times, sold Bush administration lies as truths, while ignoring well substantiated reports from both U.S. and international agencies that exposed the official lies as lies.

For propaganda to work most effectively, its message must dominate all communication channels. All media must be on message. Here in the U.S., the Bush administration actually puts out daily talking points, which are trumpeted throughout a vast neo-con echo chamber that now dominates our public airwaves. The rest of the world gets news. We get a manufactured consensus perpetually repeated without challenge from a media that celebrates itself in Orwellian fashion as a "free press."

Last week, however, the cardinal rule of propaganda was broken. With the payola bust of media pundit Armstrong Williams, the invisible became visible and the term propaganda has reentered our lexicon. The Bush Education Department paid Williams \$241,000 to use his influence as a journalist to promote the controversial and underfunded "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) program. And they put it in writing, with a contract requiring Williams to promote NCLB in his op/ed columns and on his television show. The contract also required him to interview Education Secretary Rod Paige on his radio and TV shows.

Williams performed dutifully, puffing NCLB at every opportunity and "interviewed"

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Paige (a Republican wacko who once called the nation's largest teachers union a "terrorist organization"), playing a straight man role to Paige's unchallenged pontifications.

Fudging the nightly news

Ironically, our "free press" is jumping on the anti-propaganda bandwagon – condemning Williams at every turn as a fallen journalist. In reality, however, Williams is not an aberration. He represents the norm in American journalism. Technically, Williams was a subcontractor working for the Ketchum public relations company. Paige's office paid Ketchum \$1.3 million to conduct a domestic propaganda operation, of which Williams was only one component. Ketchum also produced fake TV newscast segments, known as Video News Releases (VNR), which compliant media outlets deceptively insert into their nightly newscasts. Hence, the VNR appears not as an advertisement or political argument, whose message viewers would resist, but as news.

Last year, Ketchum, under contract with the Bush administration, produced counterfeit TV news segments touting Bush's costly and somewhat cruel Medicaid "reform." Ethically challenged news producers aired the VNRs, which starred Ketchum employee Karen Ryan in her star role as a journalist. Last May, the General Accounting Office (GAO), a federal oversight agency, advised the Bush administration that the spots were "an illegal use of taxpayer dollars" and constituted "covert propaganda." Two weeks ago the GAO busted the Bush administration again for distributing VNRs in the form of anti-marijuana messages produced by the Gourvitz pr firm, starring "reporter" Mike Morris.

The Williams case highlights the Bush administration's arrogance in repeatedly violating the law and crafting domestic propaganda – while sticking their hands into the public till to use taxpayer monies to fund politically partisan messages.

A Dollar Store soul

The Nation's David Corn reported that other conservative pundits whom he spoke with were upset that in wake of Williams' bust, many people question whether they too are on the take. The sorry truth is that, with very few exceptions, they're probably not. Williams sold what little integrity he had on the open market, fetching only \$241,000. He's a whore, plain and simple. His soul was bought and paid for. The sad reality is that his colleagues are all humping away au gratis.

This all brings me to the New York Times. It frustrates me to no end when nice people mistake The Times as a liberal watchdog of democracy. It's not that The Times doesn't occasionally publish a solid expose. It's that with all the horrors and outright corruption

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in the world today, we can count The Times's great exposes on our fingers and toes.

Effective propaganda doesn't just control what you see, read and hear. It also must control what you don't see, read or hear. It's with these omissions that papers such as The New York Times serve the propaganda machine. The media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) reports that former U.S. Army Intelligence Officer and 27-year CIA veteran analyst Ray McGovern charged that he gave "a long interview on U.S. intelligence matters" to a New York Times reporter a few weeks before the U.S. presidential election. McGovern claims that at the time, he asked the reporter if the story would run before the election. According to McGovern, who didn't name the reporter, he was quite candid and said "no," explaining that there was "an embargo" at The Times on criticism of the Bush administration until after the election. To date, The Times still hasn't cited this interview.

McGovern, writing commentary for TomPaine.com, credits the New York Times for breaking the story about how the U.S. military's own Defense Science Board directly contradicted President Bush's assertion that Al Qaeda "hates our freedoms." The Board said no, they hate our policies. The problem, according to McGovern, is that the report came out in September, but the New York Times didn't report it until November 24 – well after the presidential election – providing more evidence of an "embargo."

What talking hump?

FAIR last week gave credence to McGovern's allegation by documenting how the New York Times killed "a story that could have changed the election," because, they argue, "it could have changed the election." This story began when a Fox cameraperson shooting footage at the first presidential debate inadvertently violated Bush campaign demands that pool cameras be banned from shooting rear shots of the candidates. The footage showed a strange hump on Bush's back, leading to lots of on-line speculation about a possible medical device, bulletproof shield, or radio receiver. The Bush campaign dismissed such speculation as being the product of "conspiracy buffs." But it turns out the "buffs" were onto something. A team of New York Times reporters interviewed Dr. Robert Nelson, a 30-year veteran at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Nelson's job entails using computer enhancement equipment to analyze photos from space. When he used the same technology to enhance Fox's debate feed, according to the FAIR report, he found "a significant T-shaped object in the middle of Bush's back" and "a wire running up and over his shoulder."

The Times reporters then interviewed the owner of a spy ware company who identified the unit as a "magnetic cuing device" with a "wire yoke around the neck" broadcasting to

a hidden earpiece. Such devices, he told the reporters, are commonly used by actors, musicians and politicians.

In essence, FAIR points out, Bush cheated during the debates, receiving facts and answers during those strange awkward pauses. FAIR quotes Ben Bagdikian, the Dean Emeritus of the University of California at Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, who said, "This was credible photographic evidence not about breaking the rules, but of a total lack of integrity on the part of the president." "Given that exit polls show many who voted for Bush around the country listed 'moral values' as a big factor in their decision," the FAIR report speculates that news of Bush cheating during the debates might have cost him votes. No strangers to lying themselves, Times editors first stonewalled, insisting that their reporters were never working on such a story. Finally, on December 21, they confirmed that they killed the story – but never offered a solid explanation as to why – only pointing out that no other major news outlet covered the story. Hence, a story isn't a story until someone else covers it.

Then there are Bush's countless lies – which can never be called lies. At a post-election panel discussion sponsored by the Medill School of Journalism, FAIR reports that an audience member asked New York Times reporter Elizabeth Bumiller why the press never objectively reports about Bush's telling of lies. Bumiller responded, "...it's very hard to write these [stories], because you can't say George Bush is wrong here. There's no way you can say that in The New York Times." When pressed by the moderator, she responded that "you can [call Bush a liar] in an editorial, but I'm sorry, you can't in a news column." When pressed further, she responded plainly, "You can't say the president is lying – that's a judgment call." Hence a lie's not a lie unless someone calls it a lie, and no one will call it a lie even if it's clearly a lie – not in the New York Times. Not ever.

*Michael I. Niman's previous columns are also archived at www.mediastudy.com.
FAIR's media criticism is available at www.fair.org.*