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An Epistemological Account of the Logic of Propaganda

Erratum

Sponsored by Bob Goeckel

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Michael Badalamenti

sponsored by David Levy

ABSTRACT

Propaganda is an un-avoidable feature of modern society. It has been identified with multiple global conflicts, oppressive totalitarianisms, and misinformation campaigns that threaten democracy. Despite the world's popularization in discourse, it remains somewhat ambiguous, begetting many attempts to define and analyze the concept of propaganda. This project contributes to this effort by examining how propaganda involves itself in logical forms of reasoning and judging its value from an epistemological perspective. Propaganda can be interpreted through logically argumentative forms. These arguments are always improper, involving an invalid form or false proposition; therefore, propaganda cannot directly provide real knowledge. Nevertheless, it succeeds in leading its audience to adopt a belief or action through nonlogical means and the manipulation of available information. An individual may identify and avoid propagandas that rely solely on nonlogical techniques by working to identify their apparent logical flaws, although resisting them altogether still appears to be a major challenge. Unfortunately, propagandas that manipulate available information are far more difficult for an individual to avoid, due to their leveraging of the propagandee's lack of knowledge held by the propagandist and inability to find the truth themselves. The only way to effectively limit the negative epistemic influence of these propagandas may lie at the societal level, but specific solutions remain a subject of debate and additional research.

Items called “propaganda” have had an influential role in the history of the last century. In one infamous instance, the Nazi regime used propaganda to mobilize the German nation to initiate one of the most destructive and atrocious wars the world has ever seen (Appendix 1-a). More recently, the Russian state has been accused of using it to polarize politics in the United States in advance of the 2016 election (Appendix 1-d). Democratic governments have not abstained from sponsoring its production either, as evidenced by the United States' mobilization for World War I and contemporary controversies over the content of state textbooks (Appendix 1-e). Upon closer examination, propaganda does not appear to be the exclusive product of political entities, nor is it only involved in major events: indeed, it seems that it is proliferated by a variety of public and

private organizations and can target activities that seem relatively inconsequential, such as the decision of a consumer to buy one product over another.¹

This apparent pervasiveness of propaganda, especially in relation to movements that look to be dangerous to the overall wellbeing of society, is what motivated me to begin this project. I chose to look at these things called propaganda from the perspective of epistemology, the study of knowledge, and to evaluate their effect on an individual's ability to gain knowledge, something I consider to be basically and intrinsically good. To this end, I looked at how propaganda engages in forms of logical argumentation, as I consider logical reasoning to be the most reliable tool at an individual's disposal for arriving at true conclusions from available information, for gaining knowledge.

In doing so, I have developed a unique definition for propaganda—which is compatible with many pre-existing definitions—based in the necessarily improper format of its logical argumentation, and thereby its inability to give its audience knowledge directly. This definition can increase the capacity of an individual to identify, analyze, and potentially avoid certain kinds of propaganda, namely those with inherent logical flaws. There still exist other forms, however, that are more evasive, thanks to their manipulation of information made available to their audience and internal logical consistency, calling for more research into the subject of how these propagandas may be mitigated.

Background and Challenges to Defining Propaganda

To begin talking about propaganda, we must first establish a working understanding of the concept. Unfortunately, “propaganda” is a woefully ambiguous and sensation-ally charged term, so much so that some researchers have suggested that it should be avoided in analytical contexts (Marlin, 2013, p. 4). Some of this ambiguity can be traced in the word's complicated history.

Examples of propaganda can be found as far back as the Peloponnesian War, but the modern term did not appear until the 17th century, when the Latin *propagare* was used by the Catholic Church to describe missionary efforts to spread, or propagate, the Catholic faith (Miller, 2005, p. 9). By the 19th century, the word was still rather obscure in the Anglosphere, but carried fairly neutral connotations when applied, with it being used to describe ideological crusades and campaigns to promote public health alike (Miller, 2005, pp. 10- 11). Social, political, and technological developments by the turn of the century allowed for the creation of the first true mass media campaigns, which were used extensively during World War I by the German, British, and American governments to facilitate military and industrial mobilization (Badsey, 2014). The war had the effect of popularizing the word “propaganda” and, given the efficacy of these campaigns, legitimizing the careers of those involved in mass media persuasion (Miller, 2005, pp. 11-13).

1: This is not to suggest that all marketing is propaganda, though some of it is. This distinction is clarified in the *Stipulative Definition* section. For one example of marketing that is propaganda (Appendix 1-f).

This period also laid the groundwork for the word's pejorative connotations in English. "Propaganda" was used to describe German information efforts, which were denounced as malicious and deceitful, while the Allies avoided publicly applying the word to their own efforts, instead describing them as educational and informative (Miller, 2005, pp. 13-14). There was an attempt in the 1920s by some wartime propagandists, many of whom had now turned to working for the private sector, to recover the term's more neutral meaning, but these efforts failed (Miller, 2005, p. 15). Terms such as "marketing," "advertising," and "public relations" came to be used to describe their activities, while "propaganda" came to be associated with political and governmental activities, even though this private sector work used remarkably similar tactics (Miller, 2005, pp. 18-19). The extensive use of propaganda by the German Nazis during World War II and the Russian Communists during the Cold War seems to have solidified the word's negative connotations throughout the English-speaking world.

This turbulent history produced a variety of definitions of propaganda. Edward Bernays, an early pioneer and proponent of propaganda in the 1920s, described propaganda as the means of communicating the complex views and information of an organization or individual to others in a more consumable form, as a part of popular discourse (Bernays, 2005, pp. 38-39). He argued that propaganda was a practical necessity for a modern democratic society, as without it, the discourse at the foundation of democratic decision-making would be unworkable, because people lack the means needed to properly hear and digest the complete views of competing interests (Bernays, 2005, pp. 37-38). According to him, propaganda is actually beneficial to society, so long as propagandists followed a proper code of ethics (Bernays, 2005, pp. 69-70).

By contrast, Jacques Ellul, a French philosopher and sociologist that wrote in the 1960s and 70s, saw propaganda as an inevitable yet distinctly negative sociological phenomenon within a mass society, defined in a non-exhaustive way as "a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations" (Ellul, 1973, p. 61). Additionally, for Ellul, only successful propaganda is real propaganda (Ellul, 1973). It must totally encircle each individual's ability to find information, exercising every medium available, becoming constant, unignorable, and unchallenged, as anything less would fail in subjugating the individual to the propagandist (Ellul, 1973, pp. 9-14).

Disagreement over a proper definition of propaganda remains in the 21st century, especially over the necessary characteristics of propaganda. Such controversial or vague elements of definitions include: whether or not propaganda must be produced or spread by some intention; the relationship propaganda may have with truth; whether or not propaganda is necessarily beneficial or detrimental to a society; whether or not propaganda has some inherent ethical skew; the degree to which propaganda may involve actual alterations to an individual's environment or condition; the acceptable subject matter of propaganda (e.g. whether commercial marketing is a form of propaganda, or if it should be treated as a separate category, with propaganda restricted to

the political realm); the audience for propaganda (whether it must target an entire society, a group, or just one individual); whether true propaganda must be successful or not; whether propaganda must seek to inspire action, or if shaping attitudes and beliefs is sufficient; and, whether propaganda must involve a large, organized campaign, or if more singular efforts can be included.²

Considering these controversies is a significant task when discussing propaganda. Should one draw a conclusion about a more restrictive definition of propaganda, another may inappropriately generalize that conclusion to a broader definition. However, resolving many of these controversies would be time consuming and of limited use for the purposes of more narrow research. Therefore, I seek to establish a somewhat broad definition for propaganda that aids an epistemological analysis, one that hopefully accommodates the entire set of things that could legitimately be called propaganda in its modern sense by avoiding qualifiers that should be the focus of other types of inquiry into the subject (e.g. ethical inquiries). The definition that I seek to establish here draws inspiration most directly from Randal Marlin's definition, which describes propaganda as "the organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective judgement. (Marlin, 2013, pp. 12-13). Jason Stanley also provides an inspirational characterization of propaganda, describing it as a contribution to public discourse related to supporting or repairing a flawed ideology, which is a system of belief that obstructs an individual's ability to gain knowledge within a domain (Stanley, 2015. pp. 52-56). However, this definition diverges considerably from these precursors by construing propaganda in a way that highlights how its defining features can be considered from the perspective of logical reasoning.

Stipulative Definition of Propaganda

Propaganda is an argument—or something that is intended to inspire an argument—toward a conclusion that a person or people are led to believe is proper, thereby inspiring belief or action, but is actually improper. A proper argument is one that correctly follows the rules of a form of logical reasoning. For example: if the argument is deductive, it is proper if and only if it is valid and sound; if it is inductive, this means it is strong and cogent; if it is abductive, this means it is simple, practical, and probable. Moreover, proper arguments are made with consideration paid to all potentially-relevant available information,³ so that potential defeating evidence and counter

2: Such differences are found between the definitions established by various scholars that are discussed by Ellul's *Men's Attitudes*, Marlin's *Persuasion* in pages 7-12, and Stanley in pages 48-53.

3: I will admit that this is an ambiguous notion. I lack a way to state generally what sort of information is or is not relevant to an argument. Pitting an argument against all of the information available to an individual would be an impossible task, and probably largely pointless—why ensure that an argument about tomorrow's weather forecast is consistent with the color of a banana? However, it is also possible that information that seems irrelevant on the surface could lead to some contradictory implications. Ultimately, we are only human. My point here is that there should be a good faith effort to consider potential contradictions to an argument when possible. This is a problem shared in

arguments are accommodated, whether by disproving competing claims or reserving some skepticism towards the conclusion. By contrast, improper arguments include invalid deductive arguments, weak inductive arguments, improbable and impractical abductive arguments, arguments predicated on false premises, uncertain forms of inference that ascribe undue certainty to their conclusions, arguments made in willful ignorance of an available defeating counterargument, and other forms of fallacious logic, such as circular reasoning. Any or all of the premises or the conclusion of a propaganda argument may actually be true or false statements about the world; if all are true, the problem lies in the connection between them being illogical.

Any informational medium—a thing that is capable of conveying information—whether it be visual or auditory, artistic or academic, an object, an event, or anything in between, may act as propaganda, and media that began without a propagandist purpose may be transformed into propaganda when presented in a certain context. Any parts of the argument may be explicit in the propaganda or merely implied by, with the expectation that its audience will receive it in a certain way. Propaganda may be spread unwittingly, but it seems to require some sort of intention at its inception, although this intention may not necessarily be malicious or even conscious that it is producing propaganda. There could be many possible causes behind this propaganda-producing intention, such as a desire to deceive, apathy towards the truth, a belief that one knows truth despite failure in some epistemic duty, loyalty to some dogma, a drive for some self-interest, or a desire to legitimately help society. The original propagandist is the person or group that supplies this intention at the time of a propaganda's production, while “propagandist” more generally denotes any person, group, or thing that has the effect of leading, or attempts to lead, a person or people to believe that a propaganda argument is proper, regardless of the existence of intention. The “propagandee” is the propaganda's audience, whether intended or actual.

This definition should be understood in relation to a few other terms and concepts. A propaganda campaign is the coordinated use of multiple separate propagandas to inspire the same belief or action, or a related set of beliefs or actions. A propaganda regime is such a campaign that achieves a hegemonic status over a society, such that it is widely accepted and nearly inescapable for those within the society, making refutation of it a seemingly futile effort.⁴ A person or people may perceive any information in an entirely unintended, illogical way, but while such misperception may have essentially the same effect on them as propaganda, this phenomenon is perhaps better called mistakenness or misunderstanding than propaganda. True education, understood as

epistemology by responses to the Gettier problem: Gilbert Harman, for instance, said, “It is not at all clear what distinguishes evidence that undermines knowledge from evidence that does not” (Harman, 2008, p. 204). This problem is also analogous to a problem facing a coherentist theory of knowledge: what sort of body of beliefs must a belief cohere with for it to be justified? Beliefs that are conceptually relevant, or all other beliefs? (Goldman & McGrath, 2015, pp. 11-12).

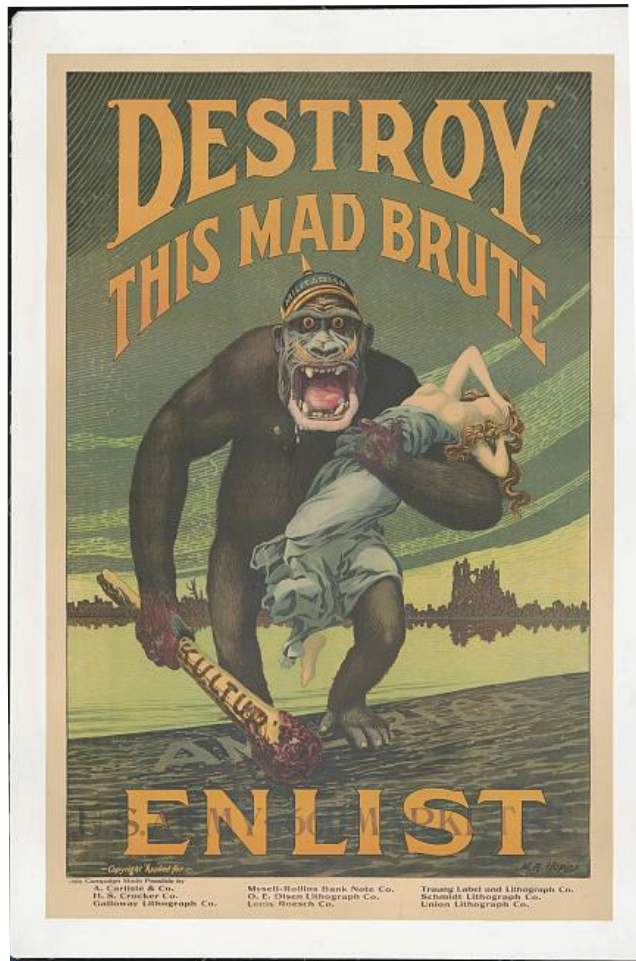
4: This concept draws inspiration from the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault on hegemonic discourse, referenced by Marlin in his talk of definitions (Marlin, 2013, p. 6); it also draws significant inspiration from Ellul's conception of propaganda, most notably what he calls “total propaganda” (Ellul, 1973, pp. 9-17).

the medium by which a person or people are taught the truth by proper arguments, is not propaganda. In practical reality, however, education is often difficult to distinguish from propaganda, as propaganda efforts are likely to masquerade as education. Furthermore, factors such as uncertainty towards the truth of premises in a proper argument, uncertainty towards the sort of intention at an argument's origin, and competing propagandas may cause an individual, especially a cynical one, to mislabel true education as propaganda. Both propaganda and education are forms of persuasion, understood as the general attempt to inspire belief. Marketing is another form of persuasion, with the term merely indicating some relationship to commerce. Items of marketing may fall under either category of education or propaganda. Public relations is a form of persuasion too, one that denotes a focus on one entity's perception among a general public audience.

Propaganda is also related to the concept of knowledge. In epistemology, knowledge is traditionally defined as a true belief that the believer has a proper undefeated justification for believing (Goldman & McGrath, 2015, pp. 52-56). Under this definition, propaganda arguments cannot grant a person true knowledge, at least not directly. If the propaganda is spreading mistruths, then the beliefs it instills are false, and therefore does not provide knowledge. If the argument it presents is improper, whether it be deductive and invalid, inductive and weak, or otherwise fallacious, but the conclusion is true, it has still failed to provide its audience with a proper justification, and thereby knowledge, even if they have indeed adopted a true belief. A propaganda argument can only provide its audience with an unjustified false belief, a justified false belief, or an unjustified true belief. When it comes to the presentation of information in logical forms, true education, not propaganda, is the path to real knowledge, to justified true belief. However, a piece of propaganda may grant knowledge indirectly, outside of its function as propaganda: for example, it would be reasonable to conclude from a poster encouraging the public to buy war bonds that a war bonds program exists, and that the nation is in a state of war. Considered in this way, the piece would serve a secondary educative purpose outside of its primary purpose as propaganda.

The Logical Definition at Work: Interpreting a Piece of Propaganda

To show how this definition may be used to interpret a piece of propaganda, consider the following poster, designed by Harry Hopps in 1917 for distribution in the United States to encourage enlistment for World War I (Hopps, 1918):



The primary purpose of the poster appears to be to get men to enlist in the military, indicated by the command at the bottom. This does not mean that the poster only targets men who are able to enlist: indeed, it may sway others to view what the military is doing more favorably, or encourage them to pressure the men they know who can enlist to do so, compounding the propaganda's efficacy. For the sake of brevity, however, I will only focus on a few propaganda arguments the poster intends to convey to the perspective of a man of enlistment age. The conclusion they are intended to derive is, "I should (or must) enlist in the military." The following short, simple argument can be immediately derived from the text:

- 1) *This mad brute should be destroyed.*
- 2) *Therefore, I should enlist.*

This argument is invalid and therefore, if intended alone, a propaganda argument. However, the argument can be made valid if the propagandee is expected to supply a premise: "If this mad brute should be destroyed, then I should enlist." But this argument still lacks justification, evidence, and fails to incorporate significant elements

of the poster. A stronger argument intended by the poster should be considered to determine whether or not it still passes as propaganda.

The large, ape-like character in a pickelhaube, alongside the descriptive “this mad brute,” are meant to convey a premise that “the Germans are brutes.” The distressed woman and bloody club, labelled “kultur,” further emphasize that point and provide some evidence of the atrocity that a brutish German may cause. The poster’s command to “destroy this mad brute” prompts a premise that so-called mad brutes should be destroyed, a premise that may be supported by societal norms of justice encountered by an individual throughout their lifetime in education and other propagandas. Other media at the time would have surely indicated that the country is at war against the Germans, providing another premise; it is therefore unnecessary for the poster to supply that information. Finally, it is implied through the “enlist” command’s inclusion that an individual’s enlistment will help the nation in its war, and thereby aid the goal of destroying the Germans. The following is one valid way this argument can be structured:

- 1) *The Germans are mad brutes that cause harm to others.*
- 2) *Mad brutes that cause harm to others should be destroyed.*
- 3) *The Germans should be destroyed.*
- 4) *If my country is fighting in a war to destroy the Germans and the Germans should be destroyed, then I should enlist (since I will thereby help the war effort).*
- 5) *My country is fighting in a war to destroy the Germans.*
- 6) *I should enlist.*

The poster conveys an additional, separate argument, one that appeals more to the propagandee’s self-interest than some high-minded righteousness. The German brute is shown stepping onto a shore labelled “America,” implying an imminent threat of invasion. No longer are his atrocities limited to Europe. Now, the propagandee’s own livelihood is at stake. This second argument may look something like the following:

- 1) *The Germans are going to invade my country.*
- 2) *If the Germans invade my country, they are going to threaten my way of life.*
- 3) *If something threatens my way of life, I should fight against it.*
- 4) *I should fight against the Germans (which I can do by enlisting).*

These two arguments are better justified than the initial invalid one, as their premises appear to be supported by evidence. If all of their premises are true, they would be educative rather than propagandist and would render knowledge to their audience, so

long as they correctly interpreted these arguments. However, both of these arguments contain at least one premise that is arguably false, thereby rendering them unsound and propagandist.

In the first argument, support for the idea that the Germans are mad brutes, the justification for their destruction, is arguably weak and should thus be treated as false. On what basis could they be called brutes, insofar as a brute is understood to be something subhuman? The mere drawing featured in the poster of a German as an ape-like creature is certainly insufficient evidence.

One could use their actions as evidence. It is true that the Germans pioneered some of the cruelest weapons of the war, including chlorine gas and the flamethrower. However, the allied powers also came to adopt and further develop these weapons. Likewise, both sides committed abuses against prisoners of war and broke the rules of warfare set forth by the Hague Conventions. The Germans did undeniably commit numerous atrocities in occupied territories, albeit not to the extremes purported by Allied propaganda; one could argue that these atrocities outweighed those committed by the Allies, but, since the Allies—save Russia, who did commit similar atrocities during their occupation of Austro-Hungarian territories—were never similarly positioned to occupy German territory in Europe, it is difficult to conclude that they might not have acted similarly (Kramer, 2017). The Germans are therefore worthy of condemnation, and perhaps retaliatory action, but this is not the same as labelling them as subhuman brutes.

How else could the Germans be labelled subhuman brutes, since it would be contradictory to call them such for committing acts comparable to those of the Allied powers, who do not label themselves as brutes? If one could identify a few Germans that are unquestionably mad brutes, that would still be scant proof that every German is a mad brute. Perhaps the mad brute refers not to the German people, but to the monarchist, autocratic German state. But if that is the case, how could an alliance with tsarist Russia, an equally oppressive regime led by a cousin of the Kaiser, be justified? It seems that the brute moniker, and all of the grievous connotations that come with it, are unearned, applied only because dehumanizing a wartime enemy helps to rally people to the cause. This argument is consequently propaganda, if only because the premise calling the Germans brutes, classifying them as sub-human monsters, is too strong given the available evidence.

In the second argument, the idea that a German invasion of US shores after 1917 is possible, never mind imminent, is weakly supported. Even ignoring the challenge posed by the U.S. Navy, the Imperial German Navy, having struggled to combat the British Royal Navy and facing an increasing state of collapse after the 1916 Battle of Jutland, would have been insufficient to provide the logistical support necessary for a significant naval invasion of the United States; not to mention how German ground forces were bogged down in France since the start of the war (Osborne, 2014). A naval invasion of the United Kingdom, a much closer target, would have still been unreal-

istic. Ultimately, this argument rests on fear to incite action, but this fear can only be inspired by those who are ignorant of the practical realities of warfare and the German situation. Once the impossibility of a German invasion is realized, the argument is revealed as propaganda based on blatant lies, considering that the Army, who must be well-versed in the practical realities of warfare, appears to be promoting it.

There is a third valid argument that could be intended by the poster when considering the trustworthiness of its source, one that is a bit more difficult to definitively call propaganda:

- 1) *The U.S. government says that I should enlist.*
- 2) *The U.S. government is a trustworthy authority in matters of the national interest, and by extension matters of my own interest.*
- 3) *I should adopt the beliefs touted by trustworthy authorities (as they are probably true) and follow their advice regarding matters relevant to their competencies.*
- 4) *I should enlist.*

This argument might not be intentional considering the context of the poster. If it is intended as a possible legitimate interpretation, it is not stressed nearly as much as the two prior arguments: the only element of the poster that clearly indicates its source is the faint watermark that says “U.S. Army.” Nothing in the poster appears to purport the trustworthiness or competency of the U.S. military or government in support of the second premise, outside of the suggestion that, in this instance, they are doing the right thing by fighting the German brute—but in that case, the prior two arguments are advanced anyways, rendering this one pointless.

Maybe support for this controversial second premise is supposed to come from some other source, as part of a larger campaign. In that case, what evidence could there be? The evidence cannot come from information propagated by the U.S. government alone, otherwise all of the arguments would be, “The U.S. government is trustworthy because the U.S. government says they are trustworthy,” resulting in a logically fallacious circularity. Support for the premise would also be weak if all of the evidence came from independent sources that had a vested interest in the people believing in the U.S. government’s trustworthiness, like an empowered political party seeking reelection or an influential lobbyist group. The government’s historical record could provide some insight, but the fact that executive officeholders change with each election raises questions over the relevance of a longer-term analysis. However, a lack of strong supporting evidence does not disprove the statement, either.

The government’s trustworthiness in this expanded context thus seems uncertain and debatable. If it is true that the government is trustworthy, this argument would be proper, educative, and provide the propagandee with knowledge. Knowledge derived from an authority’s word may not be as useful as knowledge justified in other ways,

as it is difficult to draw additional conclusions from such cursory evidence, but it is still an epistemic justification. Nevertheless, even if this premise could be proven to be true, the poster would remain as a piece of propaganda altogether due to the presence of the other arguments.

Just because these arguments are propaganda, however, does not mean that it is false that men should have enlisted for World War I. Participation in the war may very well have furthered the nation's—and consequently its people's—long-term strategic interests. Individuals that enlisted could have had the potential to reap certain rewards from their society for their contribution. It also could be false, though. Perhaps an isolationist policy would have been sustainable and better for the American people given the U.S.'s geopolitical situation. For a particular individual, maybe there is a good physical or mental health reason why they should not enlist, even if they can.

Whether or not a person should enlist to fight in a war is a complicated question. There is an objective answer as to what is best in terms of certain metrics, but that answer is often obscured, difficult to determine from the limited information of the present. A poster like this is unhelpful in trying to determine that answer. A person needs information that is presented carefully, arguments that are clear and justified with caveats to highlight exceptions and warn of uncertainties, in order to have any hope of realizing the truth in an appropriate amount of time.

Defense of the Logical Definition Against Potential Criticisms

There are some who may criticize this definition and construction of propaganda for, in their eyes, mischaracterizing propaganda. One such criticism may be over my inclusion of media and arguments that target individuals, rather than the mass. Certainly, the character of propagandas that target the mass differ greatly from those that target individuals and smaller groups. Propaganda aimed at the mass must adopt forms that appeal to the mass, forms that both accommodate and minimize the individual, making them feel significant while also small, by being relatable, identifiable, and empathetic while simultaneously vague and general (Ellul, 1973, pp. 6-9). Arguments that target other people may play off their particular histories, character traits, and interests. I do not deny this, but I do deny that this second category is not propaganda. The motivation for excluding this category seems to be an assertion that the propagandist is not concerned with winning over particular individuals with particular efforts, because such efforts are expensive at scale and thereby provide little value (Ellul, 1973, p. 6). To the contrary, the propagandist may find it valuable to target certain individuals: namely, leaders within society. If a propagandist can convert the individuals who other people already trust and follow to their cause, such as politicians, business elites, celebrities, influencers, and the leaders of groups like religious organizations, trade unions, interest groups, and clubs, they can achieve the effects of a mass campaign without adopting the character of a mass campaign (Bernays, 1928, pp. 40-44). Therefore, it seems misguided to exclude those more personal, targeted

techniques from the category of propaganda, even when those techniques are used on a relatively insignificant individual.

Another objection may concern intention. A critic could argue that, in defining propaganda, the focus should be on how it affects an audience, how it is perceived, not on its production. I assent that it is important to consider propaganda from the position of its audience, but defining it from this perspective presents difficulties. For one, I would question how such an approach would assess pieces of information intended as propaganda that fail to garner an audience. The inability to identify some propagandas from the audience's perspective presents another problem. Regardless, I will consider an example of how propaganda could arise entirely without intention, to see if this definitional approach is unjustified.

A group of people could conceivably draw some association between two things on their own, say, between a political party and a color that just so happens to be used by its members more often than not in promotional materials, without there ever having been an effort by anyone to intentionally instill that association. Then, they could simultaneously associate one of those things with a third thing, like that same color with a soft drink that happens to be that color. This group of people could then associate the other original thing with that third thing, the political party with the soft drink, without there being a proper reason to do so. If someone from this group saw a person drinking the soft drink, they might consequently think of the political party or illogically assume that the person is associated with the party in some way, influencing how they behave towards them. As a result, the people in this group would hold the same beliefs and act the same as if they had been subjected to an intentional campaign to associate the soft drink with the political party.

I think it is true that a group's own subconscious creation of illogical associations in a scenario like this—if it is possible—would have the same effect on them as an intentional campaign. However, I hesitate to relate this process more directly to propaganda. Propaganda seems to involve some kind of subversion or abuse of a person's capacity for critical thought, and such subversion or abuse appears to require intention (Marlin, 2013, p. 5). I think that this scenario, which only involves faulty critical thought, not subversion or abuse, is better characterized as a widespread misunderstanding, as mistakenness, which, if subsumed under the category of propaganda, would risk overextending the concept of propaganda.

Suppose another possible example of misunderstanding, where a group listened to a typically trustworthy radio broadcast and heard the message, "The Yankees win and will go on to the World Series." From this, they justifiably concluded that the Yankees must have won and will appear in the World Series. As Yankees fans, they excitedly shut off the radio and purchased tickets to the World Series. But, unknown to them, the actual message was, "The Yankees did not win and will not go on to the World Series." Interference caused this message to be distorted, cutting out the "did not" and "not" in a way that made the perceived message seem legitimate, not distorted.

The fans' perception of the situation thus resulted in a justified false belief. Could this misunderstanding rightfully be construed as propaganda, since it affected them the same way as an intended propaganda could have?

I do not think so. Although successful propaganda is sufficient for unjustified belief or justified false belief, it is not necessary for either; there are, for example, non-logical things that can instill and justify belief. If this misunderstanding can be called propaganda, from where did its logical argument originate? The radio, a non-thinking thing, could not have formulated such an argument, and the radio host in fact formulated an argument contrary to the message that was perceived. Perhaps you could say that the fans propagandized themselves, concluding that the Yankees won on a false premise, that the radio was reliable, in an argument that they invented for themselves. I am skeptical toward this answer, as its feasibility is rooted in controversial questions about the nature of the mind, agency, and intention, questions that I cannot resolve here.⁵ I do think that it is possible for a person to propagandize themselves using intention, for instance by intentionally surrounding themselves with certain kinds of information to protect their sensibilities, as in an echo chamber. However, in this case, there is no conceivable intention that the fans could have had to risk deceiving themselves, as deceiving themselves only resulted in them buying tickets to a game that will certainly disappoint them.⁶

Finally, there are some objections that may criticize the logically argumentative nature of this definition of propaganda. One could argue that commands, which are common features of propaganda, are not arguments. I would respond that a person may need reason to follow the commands present on propaganda. The commands inspire an argument that a person should or should not do what the command says—therein lies the argumentation.

5: If a mental process besides intention that creates logical arguments does exist, then the argumentative ideas communicated by this process to the rest of the mind or to others—not the radio or anything else in the world that inspired these ideas—could perhaps be called propaganda, in which case you have propaganda that arises without intention. However, I cannot say for certain whether subsuming such ideas under the category of propaganda would be appropriate. My notion of intention is admittedly somewhat vague, and these are questions that are probably better left to someone that is better-versed in psychology and the philosophy of mind than myself.

6: I should note that if these fans then went on to intentionally spread their belief that the Yankees won (e.g. via the argumentation “I heard the Yankees won on the radio; the radio tells the truth; I heard the radio’s message correctly; therefore the Yankees won.”)—if a misperception is intentionally communicated, even though the communicator is unaware that they hold such ideas as a result of misperception and are communicating them because they earnestly believe them to be true—then such communications could rightfully be called propaganda (as these justified false beliefs have now actually been formulated as an improper argument), and the fans could be called original propagandists. However, since the ideas they spread originated as justified false beliefs, such original propagandists could probably be called less culpable for their propaganda than those that intentionally lie or ignore the truth. I imagine that they would quickly stop producing this propaganda once they discovered evidence to the contrary, that the Yankees lost.

A stronger objection concerns what psychiatrist Vladimir Bekhterev called reflexology (Marlin, 2013, p. 74). This idea suggests that the aim of propaganda is not typically to engage the propagandee in a process of rational thought, which they would need to use to consider logical argumentation. Instead, it is meant to foster a reflexive, habitual reaction to information, so as to circumvent any rational process that might uncover its flaws. If this theory explains how much of propaganda works, how could it be said that it necessarily intends to inspire an argument?

I do not disagree with this assessment. It does not seem that our minds operate purely on logical processes; for instance, our thinking seems to involve nonlogical processes like heuristics. So much as a word, like “honor” or “freedom,” may invite a sensational feeling or habitual connection due to its meaning or regular associations, and those attributes can influence one’s disposition towards a broader idea (Stanley, 2015, pp. 2-4). Bekhterev’s reflexology provides an explanation for how a lot of propaganda succeeds.

There is reason to consider staying with the argumentative definition nonetheless. Even if propaganda may not be intended to be perceived in a logical form, its intended effects can still be expressed in a logical form for the purpose of analysis. Would-be propagandees who are subjected to this kind of propaganda might still be able to try to dissect what such a piece is trying to argue to them, if they have not developed a habitual response to its symbols or become curious as to why it expresses some attitude.

This admittedly risks introducing some subjectivity into the analysis of propaganda, as it is impossible to know with certainty what argumentative mapping the original propagandist would have agreed is most representative of their message. Yet this is a problem that arises in any analysis of an author’s intent. Without direct access to the original propagandist’s mind, it is impossible to know what they intended to say with certainty, even in propagandas that assume a logical form. Intent can only be extrapolated from the available evidence. Because of this uncertainty, one should try to consider a few of the strongest potential arguments that could be made by the propaganda when conducting this sort of analysis, involving both as many of the propaganda’s elements as possible and information that would have readily been available to the propaganda’s audience in its original context.

That said, the reflexologist’s objection is significant in shedding light on how propaganda subverts, avoids, and abuses a person’s capacity to consider it rationally. If our minds did operate strictly on the rules of logic, it is difficult to see how propaganda could be so successful, as we would conceivably be more apt to identify its flaws. This definition does not seek to diminish this reality; it merely seeks to ascribe these alternative constructions to an explanation of how propaganda works, rather than an explanation of what it fundamentally is.

Propagandist Techniques

So, how does propaganda work? How are people convinced to adopt beliefs that do not pass logical scrutiny, that lack epistemic justification? There are numerous techniques that achieve this end, which many scholars have explored in depth. Some of these techniques concern the content of a propaganda argument itself, while others have to do with the context in which an argument is presented. I will call attention to a few.

According to Bekhterev, a reflexology response may be achieved through a specific three-step process. First, the individual is physically exhausted through prolonged confinement, making them psychologically vulnerable. Next, they are forced to concentrate on a single subject, the propaganda, for an extended period, undermining their ability to concentrate. Then, the propaganda expresses certain moods, prompting the audience to echo those moods, thereby building reflexive associations between ideas and emotions (Marlin, 2013, p. 74). This process thereby instills a belief by bypassing the audience's capacity for logical reasoning. Rallies in Nazi Germany, where crowds of people stood outside for hours focused on the highly emotive speeches of Adolf Hitler, provide a good case of reflexology at work (Marlin, 2013, p. 74). Conceivably, this is not the only process that may create such a reflex-response, but just one example of how it may be achieved.

Propagandas need not always create their own habitual responses. By invoking sacred, emotionally charged ideas already present in society, propaganda can achieve the same effect with less of a concentrated effort; in fact, this method is more common than efforts to create new responses, at least initially in a campaign, as propaganda would struggle to survive if it contradicted sacred norms (Ellul, 1973, p. 35). Victor Klemperer, a German Jew who lived through the Nazi regime, talks about how he would speak with people in a school about the meanings of culture, democracy, and other ideas, and while it appeared that he was making progress in moving them away from Nazism, all it took was the invocation of heroism, talk of some heroic person or act, to reverse this progress and render discussion futile (Stanley, 2015, pp. 2-3). The way that an issue is framed, the ideals that it implicates itself with, will affect the immediate perceptions of the propagandee, thereby biasing them to receive the issue in a certain way (Marlin, 2013, pp. 96-98).

Propaganda need not even serve the ideals it touts. Stanley establishes a category of propaganda called undermining propaganda that presents itself as an embodiment of certain ideals despite effectively eroding them (Stanley, 2015, p. 53). As an example, he points to the *Citizens United* case: the Supreme Court extended constitutional rights to corporations, touting the decision as a defense of democratic ideals of free expression, while the practical effect of this decision was to erode these ideals by allowing corporations to use their wealth to crowd out smaller, less powerful voices (Stanley, 2015, p. 61). Propaganda can also associate itself with everyday things, rather than venerated ideals, to achieve this kind of response. If it becomes associated with a cultural icon, like a celebrity or a buzzword, of which a popular perception already

exists, that propaganda will likely inherit part of that popular perception, despite a lack of a logical reason for this association (Marlin, 2013, p. 96).

The use of deceptive language can support propaganda. Linguist Dwight Bolinger identifies some ways that sentences can be manipulated to change the ideas that they express. The things left unsaid are as significant as the things that are actually said, but they are harder to pick up on. Using more passive language that removes an agent—“Jane kicked the ball” versus “the ball was kicked”—can lighten the perception of that agent’s responsibility for some event. Using more positive terms, like “surgical strike” instead of “precision bombing,” can soften the impact of serious news. By omitting significant information, such as by saying, “It is believed that 10,000 people attended the rally,” leaving out the fact that this belief was held by a single overly-optimistic person who cannot count, one can technically tell the truth while conveying a false impression (Marlin, 2013, p. 99-101). Another example from Eric Swanson shows how ambiguities and vagueness in language, which he calls failures of shared information, can be utilized. A political campaign could use rhetoric that conjures different ideas in different people to gain support; for instance, appealing to a vague notion of freedom could attract the attention of both socialists and laissez-faire liberals, as both embrace a concept of freedom, but the ways they define freedom differ radically (Swanson, 2017, pp. 939-941).

Similarly, statistical information can be manipulated to advance improper arguments. By adjusting the scale of a graph, significant differences or similarities in data can be visually obscured or implied. Correlations in data can be stressed to improperly suggest causation. Averages can be skewed by adding outliers. Polling data can be biased by asking leading questions, and an unrepresentative sample of people can be used. Additionally, data can be outright fabricated, since it will probably take another person a significant amount of time to verify it (Marlin, 2013, pp. 129-134). Statistics seem to be particularly useful in propaganda since they carry an air of irrefutable scientific fact, one that can obscure the disingenuous mechanisms that may lay at their source.

Propaganda can assume a form that appears logical at a glance, but is revealed to have some flaw upon closer examination. Bandwagoning happens when an argument is meant to be believed on the basis that virtually everyone agrees with it. While consensus among informed agents may provide strong grounds for an inductive argument, this consensus is meaningless if everyone within the agreeing mass lacks justification for the belief outside of its being a mass belief. Likewise, adopting a belief after it is endorsed by a certified expert is inductively reasonable, but propaganda may be presented by people that only have the appearance of being experts, whose credentials are suspect or who are untrustworthy (Marlin, 2013, pp. 102-105). A long list of logical fallacies, including ad hominem attacks, post hoc, ergo propter hoc arguments, hasty generalizations, and begging the question fall under this category, too (Marlin, 2013, pp. 110-113).

Many of these techniques show how propaganda uses a distorted version of the truth to imply a false reality. Propaganda can also plainly lie—argue in defiance of a known truth—or bullshit—argue with insouciance towards whatever the truth is—but lying and bullshitting are more dangerous (Cassam, 2018, p. 3). Such claims can be contradicted, proven demonstrably false, damaging the credibility of the propagandist. It is much better for the propagandist to twist true information, to associate propagandist goals with irrefutable facts, even if the connection is illogical, and to be able refute contradictions as mere differences of interpretation (Ellul, 1973, pp. 52-57). When propaganda does involve blatant falsehoods, it is best if they are presented alongside an abundance of other information. This information need not be particularly relevant: the goal is to overwhelm the propagandee with more information than they can practically scrutinize, to exceed their capacity to resist (Ellul, 1973, p. 18). Even if they find some lies, there is too much other information to contradict—independent arguments that also supposedly support the conclusion—making refutation of the entire propaganda infeasible. Many will thereby take the propagandist at their word, trusting that the mass of so-called evidence has at least some truth to it. An example could be a shoddy but lengthy research paper, where people accept the paper's conclusion because they only glossed over a hundred pages of dense but nonsensical language offered as evidence.

A propaganda regime can take overwhelming a propagandee to the extreme. In what Ellul calls total propaganda, the relentless exposure of an individual to organized propaganda across different media that pervade an individual's life, eliminating the ability to retreat, can capture the mind of the propagandee in its totality, driving them to accept an idea that lacks proper justification axiomatically ((Ellul, 1973, pp. 9-10). The propagandist essentially places the propagandee in a sort of Cartesian demon world, where they have no hope of finding truth and gaining knowledge through typical means. This tends to require an accompanying censorship campaign, as dissenting views will dramatically weaken the effect of a propaganda regime, although it may be possible for total propaganda to crowd out other views on its own (Ellul, 1973, pp. 11-12). The destructive power of freedom of information to a propaganda regime can be seen in the collapse of the Soviet Union. While doubt towards the Communist party line existed prior, Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika enabled the dissemination of dissent, revealing the extent of *Pravda's* mistruths and causing the people to reject it in favor of newly available alternative sources of information from the West, hastening the Union's collapse.

Categories of Techniques: Misdirection and Misinformation

There seem to be two general categories that propagandist techniques can be roughly broken up into. When it uses appeals to emotions or ideals, associations with popularly-perceived icons, soft language, words with multiple meanings, logical fallacies, manipulated statistics and data presentations, or an overwhelming amount of distracting information, but all information relevant to the subject matter is available, it seeks acceptance by distracting the propagandee from their capacity for proper logical

reasoning, hoping that they are not paying close attention. This first category of techniques can be called misdirection. If a hypothetical perfect logical thinker—who only accepts beliefs based on their logical reasonableness, is not prone to human conditions like emotion and habit, and can process an infinite amount of information—were to analyze propaganda that relies only upon these techniques, they would be able to correctly identify it as propaganda, pointing out the lies, contradictions, or lack of real evidence present within.

The other category of propagandist techniques relies upon leveraging the propagandee's ignorance or uncertainty, their lack of knowledge. When it selectively omits key information that cannot be found in other sources, appeals to authorities that seem proper to the propagandee but are actually untrustworthy, spreads lies, bullshits, or fabricates data that cannot be presently disproven, or, at the highest level, encapsulates its audience in an unchallengeable false dogma, even an ideal logical thinker will struggle to correctly identify the propaganda. This second category of techniques can be called misinformation. These techniques are typically most effective when the propagandist is in an epistemically superior position to the propagandee; when the propagandist has knowledge that the propagandee is known to lack, the propaganda can be better tailored to appear proper. A censorship campaign might be particularly useful to a propaganda campaign using misinformation, as the censorship of views that contradict the propaganda is likely to increase the amount of certainty that propagandees place in it, unless they become aware that a censorship campaign run by the propagandist exists. Large enough censorship and propaganda campaigns could make the propagandist the sole source of information for a propagandee, significantly widening the gap in knowledge held by the propagandist vis-à-vis the propagandee and increasing the possible efficacy of misinformation techniques. So long as a hypothetical perfect logical thinker does not have the knowledge necessary to contradict the information presented by propaganda using these misinformation techniques, their ability to correctly identify the propaganda is doubtful. This is a grave problem that will be explored further shortly.

Categories of Propaganda

Similar to how propagandist techniques can be categorized, propaganda arguments can be divided into two categories: logically weak forms and logically strong forms. Note that these “weak” and “strong” monikers do not indicate the likelihood of a typical propagandee accepting or rejecting the propaganda. Factors like the pull of emotion and the capacity to process large amounts of information vary from individual to individual. The power of techniques should not be discounted; a particularly emotionally compelling weak propaganda may garner more attention and acceptance than a stronger propaganda that uses misinformation. Different forms of propaganda will naturally work better or worse depending on the nature of the propagandee. Instead, the strength or weakness of propaganda in this context indicates the ability of the hypothetical perfect logical thinker established prior, serving as propagandee, to

identify the propaganda as such based on the stipulative definition, based on how its content presents a logical argument.

For the purpose of categorization, independent arguments made by a single piece of propaganda should be judged independently, rather than judging the piece as a whole. When it is possible to place a propaganda argument in multiple categories, it should be placed in the weakest category that it qualifies for. When an argument contains multiple flaws or weaknesses within the same category, or additional flaws or weaknesses indicative of a stronger category, it may be called weaker than other arguments within that category that lack these additional problems, but it should not be recategorized. When a single piece of propaganda, or a single original propagandist, advances multiple independent arguments that contradict each other, this does not affect the categorization of either argument, except in cases where either argument is supported by a premise that the propagandist is a reliable source of information, and where one of the contradicting arguments can be accepted as educative—both of these cases should result in a weak classification of the relevant argument.

Logically Weak Forms of Propaganda

The logically weakest forms of propaganda are those whose argumentative structures are fundamentally flawed, who fail even when their premises are assumed true. Invalid deductive arguments, where the necessary premises do not lead to the conclusion or contradict each other, are one example. Inductive arguments based entirely on premises that lack a connection with the conclusion provide another. Arguments that contain significant defeating evidence within themselves also fall under this category. Defeating evidence that is irreconcilable with an argument's conclusion may not challenge the truth of premises that do support the conclusion, but the acceptance of this evidence deprives these other premises of their explanatory power, making the entire argument weak. Additionally, this category includes arguments using uncertain forms of inference that ascribe absolute certainty to their conclusions. Logicians know to reject these arguments outright, before evaluating the truth of the premises.

Another weak form of propaganda, approaching something more moderate in strength, includes arguments that are predicated on at least one false premise and arguments whose conclusions are defeated by outside evidence, where near-certain knowledge of this defeating evidence or the falsity of necessary premises is readily available to the propagandee. This form is stronger than the last because it requires the propagandee to look outside of the propaganda in order to dismiss it—to outside evidence or to necessary sub-arguments that the propaganda itself does not engage with. However, the propagandee must border on certainty in their knowledge of this outside information in order to still call this form weak.

These weak forms of propaganda may use either misdirection or misinformation techniques, although if they use misinformation, they do so poorly, either including contradictory information within themselves or touting easily refuted lies. Belief in weak propagandas is always logically unjustified. If the perfect logical thinker were also

omnipotent, all strong propagandas would appear to be of this second weak variety. But the perfect logical thinker is meant to be placed in the epistemic position of the typical propagandee, and most propagandees lack omnipotence. For that reason, logically weak propagandas should be differentiated from those that are logically strong.

Logically Strong Forms of Propaganda

Logically strong forms of propaganda are different from weak forms in that they cannot be fully discounted, either for practical or logical reasons. In order to evaluate them, these strong forms always require the propagandee to engage with uncertain forms of inference, like inductive reasoning, as if their propagandizing flaws concerned matters of actual certainty, these flaws would be readily available, and the perfect logical thinker would not be deceivable. Almost all propagandas of this type use misinformation techniques.⁷

A moderate-strong form of propaganda leaves the logical thinker in a position of great uncertainty. This category includes non-deductive arguments that are advanced by a dubious source—since they might be omitting some important information—and arguments that rely on a premise whose truth is only established by a dubious source. Reasonable grounds to distrust a source include vested interests, a lack of expertise or experience, and prior unreliability or bias on the part of the source in relation to the subject matter of the argument (Savellos & Galvin, 2001, p. 40). One hypothetical example is the case of a historically untrustworthy political party in a one-party state claiming to have done something good via its foreign policy. The logical grounds for accepting the argument are weak. However, it is difficult to reject this argument outright, as the argument follows a proper form and there is no stronger evidence available to suggest that the premises or conclusion are not true. The political party might be telling the truth, and there is no alternative source for this kind of information available that is more trustworthy. This propaganda could also thrive in multi-party states, if all of the political parties are equally untrustworthy and in continual disagreement. If three or four known liars are making equally plausible conflicting arguments, it is impossible to logically determine which one of them, if any, to believe. The logical thinker is doing their epistemic duty best by remaining skeptical, refusing to pass a judgement. However, absolute skepticism is often infeasible. If the logical thinker is prompted to act on a dubious set of information, skepticism does not seem to always justify inaction, as inaction may carry graver consequences than action. The

7: The only exception that I can conceive of is the case discussed in footnote 6: propagandas that are created when an individual communicates a justified false belief that does not arise from another propaganda. Such cases need not necessarily involve any technique; since the original propagandist legitimately thinks they are spreading the truth, and is justified in thinking so as long as they have not failed any epistemic duty (e.g. has properly considered potential defeating evidence), they are neither lying nor bullshitting. Still, this appears to be a fringe case, and propagandas of this type seem unlikely to persist—the example in footnote 6 would probably be resolved quickly once the fans encounter overwhelming defeating evidence, and would learn to be more skeptical about the radio's messages thereafter.

logical thinker may have to make a choice more or less at random. The best they can do is make preparations for the possibility that their decision was the wrong one.

The strongest forms of propaganda present themselves as fully proper arguments backed by strong sources, causing the logical thinker to accept them with a high degree of confidence. To illustrate how this can work: a well-respected, trustworthy authority in the environmental scientific community might break from character after accepting a backroom bribe, deciding to provide falsified evidence in support of a land development plan, which has been embroiled in controversy due to fears over its environmental impact. Objectively, this scientist is not trustworthy, at least not when they are being offered large sums of money to settle controversial issues. However, from the perspective of a propagandee who cannot test the environmental impact of the plan themselves, there is no logical reason to distrust them if they have settled past controversies truthfully, since they do not know about the bribe. If they have a say in approving the plan, they should greenlight it, barring some other reason for rejection. Even if the scientist's evidence is proven incorrect, it might not be justified to discount them in all future environmental controversies if they have a strong record overall, as this instance could appear to have been the result of an honest mistake. Unless direct evidence of the bribe or forgery came to light, the supposition that they have been corrupted from a single instance would be an illogical conspiracy theory. Without access to additional information, there is no way to logically identify strong propaganda from the propagandee's perspective, at least not until after we have accepted it and suffered its consequences.

Resistance to Propaganda

With these distinctions and attributes of propagandas in mind, we can begin to consider how they might be resisted by an individual subjected to them, so that their negative epistemic influence is reduced. This is a topic that calls for additional research; an entire project of equal length to this one could be dedicated to discussing how a single type of propaganda might be resisted. I can only offer a cursory glance at some considerations for the ways that the epistemic effect of propaganda can be mitigated.

Resistance to Weak Forms

The first step to reducing the influence of propaganda from the perspective of a propagandee is to recognize propaganda for what it is, to unmask it. That is where the logical definition of propaganda developed in this project becomes practically relevant. By taking informational media that have been created or affected by a mind, the source of intention, which consequently might carry some message intended to be received by the propagandee, and analyzing them from a logical perspective, by breaking down their contents and seeing how they form certain arguments, one can hope to at least unveil logically weak forms of propaganda.

Two problems emerge: First, virtually anything that has been influenced by another person—whether a textbook, a lecture, an academic journal, a painting, a sculpture, a

piece of music, a graph, a public performance, the color of a product, the context in which an otherwise benign object is placed—could serve a propagandist purpose. It would be impossible for a person to analyze every informational medium, every potentially propagandist item, that they encounter in this way, even if they knew which media have and have not been affected by people. Second, a propagandee cannot directly perceive the intentions of other minds that produce propaganda. There is uncertainty in knowing which messages are actually intended and which a propagandee has mistakenly perceived for themselves as a result of exposure to an informational medium.

How can these problems be circumvented? For the first problem, a more manageable list of things that a person should analyze in this way, based on the likelihood that these things will include propaganda and have a practical effect on one's life or society, must be constructed. An individual might be inclined to start by analyzing things that seem to have a noticeable impact on their beliefs, especially those beliefs that are foundational to motivating other beliefs or substantial actions. It would be a waste of time to analyze ineffective or inconsequential propagandas. However, some propagandas find success by virtue of their subtlety: they affect belief without calling much conscious attention to themselves. An individual therefore must occasionally look to informational media that initially appear more benign as well. Things that seem to invoke some propagandist technique, like media that incite some emotion, may be more likely to be propaganda, and thus may be deserving of particular attention.

Another list of things worth evaluating could be based on their known origin. Certain people or organizations, particularly those in a position to gain from people holding certain beliefs, like an elected official or a company behind a new product, may be more likely to produce propaganda. Such a list could then be further refined by establishing the trustworthiness of particular individuals or organizations, based on the frequency of their messages being educative or propagandist. One would then be justified in approaching the claims of established sources with initial belief or doubt, only fully analyzing their claims occasionally to check for change, making room to evaluate the claims of newcomers.

A list might also be established by topic: propaganda might be produced for certain topics, like causes for warfare, more often than others, and certain topics might have a greater relevance to one's life or society than others. Certain kinds of media could be more conducive to communicating propaganda, too. By developing such lists, a propagandee could prioritize analyzing more impactful and more suspect informational media, thereby unmasking and reducing the influence of more propagandas that have a greater negative epistemic impact than one who analyzes informational media at random.

As for the second problem, it is true that, without an original propagandist's commentary—which is unlikely to come to light, especially in cases where they are seeking malevolent or selfish ends—it can be difficult to know the intended message within

an informational medium, if there is one, with a high degree of certainty. Still, the author's intent may be discernable by using clues within a supposed propaganda's content and original context. Necessarily intentional elements, like words in a poster or cartoon, might be discernible from potentially accidental elements, like vague facial expressions or backgrounds. If so, it makes sense to focus on the intentional elements and include as many of them as possible in a complete mapping of the propaganda's arguments. Consider the source, if available: the supposed original propagandist might have interests that are naturally apparent, and certain arguments may serve these interests better than others. When multiple informational media share a source, there could be a common trend among their messages. A piece might be clearly intended for a certain audience, or could have multiple messages intended for different audiences that perceive it. The propaganda may anticipate and appeal to the typical beliefs of such intended audiences, so these beliefs may form part of the propaganda's argument.

Confidence that a certain message is intended may be increased by having multiple people independently analyze the piece, especially if those people are from different backgrounds and are not biased to think that the piece must be or must not be intended for them. Evaluating multiple interpretations is probably a good thing, at least for epistemic purposes, as even if one of the messages being considered was unintended, better classified as a misinterpretation than a propaganda or educative argument, considering it on its logical merits alone is likely to give the analyst knowledge regarding its substance.

Once a weak propaganda argument is unmasked, it can be refuted on the basis of its clear improperness. Still, this may be easier said than done—the perfect logical thinker only exists as a hypothetical. Social pressures to conform and other practical considerations may make it rational for an individual to continue to accept propaganda, at least publicly, although the public act of accepting it may cause them to truly believe in it over time. Psychological phenomena that propaganda techniques appeal to, like emotion and habitual responses, may also make it difficult for an individual to fully relinquish belief in a propaganda.

Resistance to Strong Forms

When it comes to strong forms of propaganda, the propagandee faces even greater difficulties in resisting them. Regarding moderate-strong forms, they encounter the same issues in discovering them as they do with weak forms. However, it becomes even more difficult for the propagandee to abandon a moderate-strong propaganda after it is found; it cannot be practically discounted, since there are no logically superior alternatives to turn to and agnosticism on the propaganda's subject may be impractical or logically undesirable.

The strongest forms of propaganda appear almost impossible to resist. Since they leverage the fact that the propagandee lacks the knowledge necessary to recognize them, they cannot be unmasked, as they appear indistinguishable from proper educative

arguments. If they cannot even be identified, how could they be resisted? Consider then a society captured by this kind of propaganda, as in the case of Ellul's total propaganda, something that a person born in Nazi Germany might have experienced had that regime persisted for a few generations and succeeded in its terrible designs. That individual, the regime's perpetual propagandee, would scarcely be better off than the subject of Descartes' evil demon when trying to gain knowledge about subjects where propaganda is necessary to legitimizing the regime—the individual's logical reasoning would continually lead them to false conclusions, as the only evidence available to them would have been carefully crafted to deceive them. They might assume educative arguments to be a weak form of propaganda, as they have been so convinced of certain false beliefs that they accept them as axioms. Such an individual could adopt a true belief by supposing that the regime is lying, but this idea would be a speculative conspiracy theory without evidence, making belief in this idea unjustified, a lucky guess at the truth, not knowledge. The epistemic prospects of this individual appear considerably limited.

Perhaps there exists some nonlogical means that could root out these propagandas more often than not, but what could these means be? I cannot conceive of any approach to information that could be more reliable in discerning truth from falsehood than logical reasoning. This possibility aside, only a position of total skepticism, where the individual adopts an agnostic, noncommitted position towards all ideas by jettisoning all beliefs—except for those that are necessarily true, like a belief in self-existence—would ensure that a person is totally protected from the influence of propaganda; but it cannot be justified to adopt this position. The motivation for resisting propaganda here is to curb its negative epistemic effect on individuals, its ability to prevent them from gaining knowledge and inculcate them with unjustified or false beliefs. Total skepticism would throw out the bulk of real knowledge alongside propaganda. That position would only appear to be justifiable if it is worse for an individual to hold a preponderance of false and unjustified beliefs than no beliefs at all and it is true that propagandas tend to capture the individual more often than real knowledge.

A skeptic encounters a paradox if they justify their skepticism in this way. They need to believe that people are probably more prone to propaganda than knowledge, yet they cannot seem to hold this belief without abandoning their skepticism. This paradox aside, I argue it is more reasonable to disbelieve the premise that strong propagandas tend to capture people more often than real knowledge. If this were the case, it would seem to me that the history and continued survival of humanity could only be explained as an accident, or as an inevitability thanks to some outside force, two explanations I consider to be unlikely. Our understanding of the deeper mechanisms at play might be muddled and inaccurate, but the practical utility of many ideas—our ability to predict outcomes and act accordingly, the mere ability of many of us to survive for eighty years, never mind our technological progress—seems to suggest that we do hold more knowledge than propaganda, at least concerning matters of significance contained within this reality. Selective skepticisms towards specific topics where we—either as a collective or individuals—appear less certain in our knowledge, or where

agnosticism might be preferable to taking a position, are justified: for example, I know that, having never studied theoretical physics in depth, my understanding of string theory is probably shoddy, and so I choose to take no position on whether the theory is likely true or false, especially since my life will probably remain practically unaffected no matter what position or non-position I take. But these selective skepticisms must be formed on the basis of some knowledge, otherwise their random adoption risks throwing out knowledge and its practical effects at the same rate as propaganda.

We must therefore accept the risk that we are sometimes being deceived by strong propagandas. Perhaps the best way for an individual to compensate for this reality without creating larger epistemic problems for themselves is by holding on to the possibility that any of their beliefs may be wrong, by remaining flexible and adjusting their beliefs according to the newest proper evidence as it emerges. Still, this could be infeasible. Going back to constantly reevaluate the veracity of your beliefs is a laborious task. It might be necessary for individuals to hold some beliefs axiomatically, even if such certainty is unjustified, in order for them to gain further knowledge within a field.

Resistance to Propaganda at the Societal Level

The prospects of an individual attempting to avoid propaganda entirely seem rather grim, but perhaps solutions can be found at the societal level, outside of the individual. Such solutions could strive to either reduce the ability of people to produce propaganda, reduce their interest in creating it, increase the ability or interest in producing real education, or increase the public's awareness of or ability to resist propaganda.

One significant debate focuses on the epistemic benefits of free speech versus the censorship of propaganda. Even though it will allow for the production of propaganda, free speech might carry epistemic benefits for a society: for example, the proliferation of improper arguments could be necessary to practicing and strengthening proper argumentation, while censoring propaganda could weaken our defenses against censored ideas and make them more alluring (Smart, 2018, p. 10-11). However, there is no guarantee that propaganda will not overwhelm a system with legally protected free speech, and it may be impossible to eliminate social pressures for conformity, allowing for propagandas to still attain a hegemonic status, stifling knowledge. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of censoring propaganda is reliant upon the reliability of the censors, who must have both the ability to identify propaganda and a genuine interest in censoring it. While censors may have access to additional information that puts them in a better position to identify propaganda than the average propagandee, an organization with the power to censor could be open to corruption and abuse. Censorship can be used to support propaganda as effectively as it can be used to support knowledge, if not more so.

Another way that a society could counter propaganda is by reducing epistemic inequality, since misinformation relies upon the propagandee's ignorance relative to the propagandist. Jason Stanley suggests that economic equality is a means to this end.

Economic inequality makes people ignorant to the lived experiences of other classes, and furthermore causes them to dogmatically defend what they see as their class's interests out of economic anxiety (Stanley, 2015, p. 19). Reducing economic inequality would thus both reduce the differences in knowledge between groups of people that propaganda can exploit and mitigate a source of propaganda, since there would no longer be a widespread interest in producing propagandas to protect classist interests.

Sponsoring publicly-accessible true education would be another means of reducing epistemic inequality, although, just as in the case of censorship, it carries a risk. If the sponsors of such education struggle to discern propaganda themselves, or have an interest in spreading propaganda, then they may, intentionally or not, contribute to the dissemination of propaganda in a society. Classes that teach people about logical reasoning could improve their ability to recognize and resist weak propagandas.

A more controversial means of eliminating propaganda might involve eliminating rights to privacy. If a truly trustworthy state actor had access to and recorded every action committed by every individual, the state would have far more evidence that it could use to discern propaganda from knowledge, enabling them to censor or expose propagandists. Alternatively, every citizen could be given such access to every other citizen, so that anyone could make such determinations. If there were some way to read people's thoughts, memories, and intentions using technology, the production of many types of propaganda, particularly those that are intentionally deceptive for the propagandist's benefit at the propagandee's expense, would be virtually impossible.

Finally, the fields of virtue and vice epistemology might reveal how the attitudes and dispositions of individuals could be changed—either on a mass scale via social pressures or by a person themselves—so that people are more naturally resistant to propaganda. For example, dogmatism, the habit of clinging to a rigid set of ideas even if they are challenged, is an epistemic vice that has an overall effect of preventing an individual from gaining knowledge, even if it protects some knowledge from propagandist attacks (Beatson et al., 2019, p. 49-50). Cultivating more of a healthy skepticism or ideological flexibility in lieu of dogmatism may eliminate the ability of propagandas to use dogmatic beliefs as a vector, and may make educative arguments more likely to succeed over propaganda.

Of course, these solutions are only some cursory suggestions, potential remedies. I have not considered their efficacy on any basis other than the possibility that they might liberate a society's individuals from the influence of propaganda, enabling them to gain more knowledge. Some of these solutions, like ending rights to privacy, are certainly ethically dubious, and therefore probably should not be adopted. Others might be impractical or impossible to implement, either from a technical or policy standpoint—for example, attempts to alter school curricula might face significant pushback from teachers or parents. Some of these solutions may even have a negative epistemic effect at a collective level: for example, from the perspective of the idea of Mandevillian intelligence in social epistemology, a system may be able to gain more

knowledge overall if some of its epistemic agents have certain epistemic vices that cause them to produce propaganda (Smart, 2018, p. 10-11, 15-16). Paradoxically, a bit of propaganda that limits the knowledge of some individuals might increase the availability of knowledge to a society overall. The value of the ability for individuals to gain knowledge must be weighed vis-à-vis these other considerations if one seeks to appraise the full impact of a proposed change on an individual or society.

Concluding Remarks

When I began this project, I had hoped to find some way to conclusively identify propaganda, so that I could avoid it and develop opinions for myself that were better informed. I believe that I have at least found some success in this goal. I have found a way to describe propaganda objectively and, in doing so, have revealed how many propaganda can be identified and avoided. As a result, I have been able to begin reevaluating the standing of some of my own beliefs, to consider how I adopted them and the legitimacy of the arguments made in support of them, so that I can find better grounding for them, reject them when counterarguments appear more proper, or develop a healthy degree of skepticism around them when all appears uncertain.

Yet I cannot help but feel somewhat dissatisfied. To be secure in all of our beliefs, to resist propaganda entirely without jettisoning real knowledge alongside it, borders on the impossible: it would either require omniscience or the absence of propagandist intentions from the world. Even resisting logically weak forms of propaganda presents major challenges, rooted in the practical but limited nature of the human psyche and non-epistemic concerns. Furthermore, if such weak propaganda is successfully resisted, the issue of truth remains. Proving an argument to be flawed does not prove its conclusion to be false. Educative arguments still must be discovered on their own, adding to the work necessary to gain true knowledge. It seems to me that, while we can actively work to curb its influence, we are ultimately destined to live with propaganda, that there will never be a way to eliminate propaganda altogether.

One might place hope in the future, believing that advancements in technology will make propaganda easier to reveal or harder to produce. I am more pessimistic about the future's prospects. I am a member of the first generation to be raised entirely in the context of a popularized and accessible internet, which has enabled instant access to insane amounts of information and fostered the development of a truly global mass culture. On one hand, the internet has made it easier than ever before to learn new skills, conduct research, share one's findings, and interact with other people, suggesting that it has the potential to spread knowledge to all, to reduce propaganda's influence. However, the internet has simultaneously made it easier to disseminate propaganda, obscure the source of information, and confirm one's own biases, as evidence for virtually any belief can be found online, alongside a community of people espousing said beliefs. Meanwhile, other technologies have enabled the production of more convincing fabrications, like deep fakes, that can be used to support propaganda. The

mere existence of this technology casts doubts upon genuine evidence as well, making the truth more difficult to discern.

That said, I am not convinced that technology will necessarily make it harder to gain knowledge in the future, either. Technologies present opportunities to enhance both education and propaganda. I believe that our real epistemic future will be determined by how society reacts to these technological changes culturally, socially, and politically, and by how these reactions accommodate or complicate the production and consumption of propaganda versus education. We have some ability to affect the conditions of our future, and we should seek one that includes our betterment, whatever that betterment may entail. I cannot claim to know what we should do to achieve a better future, except that I know that the best way we can realize substantial solutions is through perception, reflection, and discussion of the evidence available to us. Therefore, I argue that we must continuously explore, consider, and debate the topics touched on by this project and the multitude of perspectives on them, and take action to advance what we know to be the right response once we are secure in that knowledge to the best of our ability. I can only hope that I have made a positive contribution to that effort here, that I have succeeded in rendering, both for myself and for you, the reader, some knowledge about propaganda.

APPENDIX

The appendix includes interpretations, per the stipulative definition, of additional real pieces of propaganda, similar to the interpretation of the World War I poster in the main body of the text. The interpretations here should not be considered exhaustive of the propaganda arguments contained in each respective piece. They are included to show how propaganda can be found and analyzed across a wide variety of informational media. The appendix is located in the online edition of *Proceedings of GREAT Day 2020*, found at <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2020/iss1/16>.

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