

Consequences, of course, befall the agent who rebels against the system, such as a whistleblower, regardless of the high ethical, moral, and professional nature of their stance.

## Understanding Propaganda in Our Information Environment

*“How easy it is to make people believe a lie, and how hard it is to undo that work again!”<sup>374</sup>*

—Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens)

The socio-political landscape globally presents a disconcerting fusion of nationalism and propaganda. About recent conditions in Eurasia, Pankaj Mishra says:

Hyper-patriotic media have emerged in India, China and Russia over the last decade, together with pseudo-thinkers who have upgraded national self-images by hailing the glories of Hindu civilisation, Russian empire, and Confucian harmony... Today, the news and analysis received by the vast majority of people in India and China as well as Russia is—in the words of the head of the Levada Centre, Russia’s independent public research organization—a compendium of ‘lies and hatred on a fantastical scale.’<sup>375</sup>

The fanning of these societal trends can usually be traced to the highest echelons of the political system. Xi Jinping’s July 2021 words at the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) centenary celebration provide an example. As he declared, the CCP would “unite all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation, both at home and abroad, behind the goal of national rejuvenation.”<sup>376</sup> At a November 2021 meeting of senior party leaders, this “Xi Jinping Thought” was officially endorsed as “the essence of the Chinese culture and China’s spirit.”<sup>377</sup> Needless to say, the condition in much of the rest of the world varies only in degree from the descriptions above.

In the United States, the word “propaganda”<sup>378</sup> is not frequently used to point to a prevalent internal condition. Perhaps it would be fair to say that, to save one’s sanity, the word is best avoided

domestically.<sup>379</sup> The image seems to be that propaganda mostly happens in other parts of the world. The vacuum, however, is filled by the coinage and usage of phrases such as fake news, alternative facts, infodemic, conspiracy theories, and even “truthiness.” Whether or not there is any propaganda in the United States, the need to more fully understand the concept remains—at least the most common modalities in which propaganda is conducted:

1. by repetition/coverage—for example, when the least important of ten truths is repeated and emphasized time and again, it is likely to assume a higher and more instrumental validity or value in the mind of the recipient of such communication.
2. by commission—presenting substantially false information as authentic and true.
3. by elision (or omission, suppression, selection, obfuscation, interpretation, censoring, sophistry, or clever argumentation)—the safest and the most versatile of all modes.

Another way to think about the propaganda paradigm would be through the two categories of *suggestio falsi* (suggestion of an untruth) and *suppressio veri* (suppression of the truth). In the model above, *suggestio falsi* would roughly cover commission (and repetition), whereas *suppressio veri* would overlap elision and omission.

It is important to be mindful that the more sophisticated propaganda models rely mostly upon elision and omission rather than commission. *Suppressio veri* is much more effective as a vehicle of persuasion and mental conditioning. Besides, it is censorship (*suppressio veri*) that creates the environment where selective *suggestio falsi* becomes potent and decisive. Censorship, therefore, deserves particular attention in understanding propaganda.

And censorship is not just implicit or voluntary as commonly perceived in the West; it is explicitly and actively enforced by our institutions, sometimes blatantly. History provides many examples, such as the excision of non-conformist language used by Dr. King

in his collection of sermons published with the title *Strength to Love*. Phrases such as “the ugly practice of our nation,” “a deep-seated change,” “evil because it is based on a contempt of life” were expunged by the publisher.<sup>380</sup> Why? Because they explicitly referred to segregation, capitalism, and colonialism respectively.<sup>381</sup> Talking about the early Christian church, Dr. King commented: “Its views on war were clearly known because of the refusal of every Christian to take up arms.”<sup>382</sup> That had to be taken out too.<sup>383</sup>

Legendary war correspondent Martha Gellhorn began to write in the 1930s. Despite her illustrious background, she was not given the opportunity to cover the Vietnam War. In 1966, she did manage to get to Vietnam on her own and wrote a series of pieces, but no US newspaper<sup>384</sup> would touch them: “Everywhere I was told,” she would later recall, “that they were too tough for American readers.”<sup>385</sup> Subsequently, Gellhorn’s attempts to return to Vietnam were officially thwarted through visa refusals and bureaucracy.

And journalist Glenn Greenwald’s recent departure from *Intercept*, which he co-founded, could be classified as enforced censorship. That, reportedly, has to do with *Intercept*’s desired outcome of a presidential election. Within the week before the 2020 elections, Greenwald wrote an article that threw negative factual light on then-candidate Biden. Reportedly, *Intercept* would not allow him to do that, and Greenwald would not water down his writing to the management’s satisfaction.<sup>386</sup> Even *Intercept*’s co-founder, whose contract reportedly stipulated that he would not be censored, could not write what he considered necessary for the voting public to know.

While it is relatively easier to find and “prove” examples of censorship (compared to the more elusive “commissioned” propaganda), it is important to realize that the two are just different sides of the same coin. In fact, censorship is just a subset of propaganda because it falls within the third category: “elision.” In other words, where there is censorship, there is propaganda.

The product of the intellectual industry is an implicit censorship paradigm that may be subtle and is usually denied, yet it is not so hidden. If we simply factor in what some former insiders have to say,

that conclusion is truly irrefutable. The undeniable consequence is that reality is always constricted, yet the threat to freedom of speech and intellect is not widely acknowledged. The societal consequences are perturbing.

### **Colonized Imagination Undermining Education**

The cultural milieu within which one grows up has historically provided context and contribution towards educating the citizen. Also, until fairly recently—let’s say until the industrial revolution—the relationship of human cultures with nature and surroundings was that of dependence and interdependence. Historically, this understanding, directly influenced by our spiritual belief systems, drove the societal paradigms of education. The concept of human “mastery” over nature is rather new. Even though nature itself reminds us again and again that it cannot be mastered by humans, yet, in seemingly irredeemable human hubris, we keep pursuing the mirage. Remedying the current disconnect in that regard, however, may not be as out of reach even within the present systems of education.

Dr. Martin Shaw of the Schumacher College in Devon, England reminds us of the Gaelic tradition where educational stories were called the “swan-feather cloak ... every moment of your life should have you clothed in story... What I see around me [now] is children with colonised imaginations. They don’t suffer a deficit of attention, but a deficit of images that arrest the soul. Once you provide them [stories], you are in the business of real education—to lead out.”<sup>387</sup>

It would be important to clarify two significant points that Shaw underscores. First, the notion of understanding our existence through stories and fables deserves a lot of attention. Not just a Gaelic notion, it’s a human one. Its manifestation and application become abundantly clear when we take a respectful glance at the indigenous cultures in America or elsewhere in the world. In her poem titled “The Speed of Darkness,” Muriel Rukeyser may be referring to a similar understanding when she says, “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.”