



# Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes

*Jacques Ellul*

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## **Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes** Jacques Ellul

"A far more frightening work than any of the nightmare novels of George Orwell. With the logic which is the great instrument of French thought, [Ellul] explores and attempts to prove the thesis that propaganda, whether its ends are demonstrably good or bad, is not only destructive to democracy, it is perhaps the most serious threat to humanity operating in the modern world."

--Los Angeles Times

"The theme of Propaganda is quite simply...that when our new technology encompasses any culture or society, the result is propaganda... Ellul has made many splendid contributions in this book."

--Book Week

"An exhaustive catalog of horrors. It shows how modern, committed man, surrounded and seized by propaganda, more often than not surrenders himself to it only too willingly, especially in democracies--because he is educated for his rule as dupe. 'The most favorable moment to seize a man and influence him,' Ellul writes, 'is when he is alone in the mass; it is at this point that propaganda can be most effective. This is the situation of the 'lonely crowd,' or of isolation in the mass, which is a natural product of modern-day society, which is both used and deepened by the mass media.' "

--Los Angeles Free Press

## **Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes Details**

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## Jeff says

This is, put quite simply, a MUST read. It was written shortly after WWII and focuses on the propaganda machine of Goebbels. It is shocking how much of what is described in this book is the norm in today's "quality" of discourse. Truly prophetic.

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## Ki Seung says

A dense (with some technical jargon) philosophical work on the nature of man in a technical society, whether it be democratic or fascist. To consider that propaganda (as described by Ellul) is not only necessary, but also a natural outcome in a large and diverse modern society, is a rather bitter concept to swallow, but for me, Ellul makes an excellent case as to its diverse means and forms.

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## Jed says

Parts of this book are amazing, even today. While portions of it are a little dated or too caught up in the Cold War or focused on the forces which brought about the second world war, the insights he draws from them are not. I've never read a description of just what propaganda is or why it is so dangerous and effective that was close to this good. Ellul's background in Theology shines through in a lot of places and he is also concerned with understanding how the modern state and the ideologies competing for control of it have evolved to play the role once played by Christianity.

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## Todd says

Despite its age, it remains a penetrating, insightful must read for how people's actions are influenced by deliberate and even incidental propaganda, and how this propaganda becomes (even without design) essential to adapting people's behavior to mechanized mass society. Typical of Ellul, his work is filled with sweeping statements not specifically supported by empirical evidence (though he cites legion other works for more technical analysis of specific subjects), but when one considers most of his propositions critically, one may be able to quibble around the edges, but finds the substance to be worth considering. Also, as normal, the work is not prescriptive and does not tell the reader "what is to be done" about the problem of propaganda and its negative impact on human dignity.

Ellul defines propaganda 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 and incorporated in an organization." (p 61) Along the lines of his The Technological Society, Ellul notes "Ineffective propaganda is no propaganda," and therefore effectiveness becomes the supreme criteria (p x) and "propaganda has decided to submit itself to science and make use of it" showing its evolution alongside technological society. (p 4) Ellul examines propaganda in the broad

sense, not of lies, but facts presented to those living in a world of information, aiming at psychological action, psychological warfare, re-education/brainwashing, and public/human relations. (p xiii) Ellul's avoidance of empiricism stems, in part, from his own analysis of it: "Modern man worships 'facts'--that is, he accepts 'facts' as the ultimate reality. He is convinced that what is, is good...which he somehow connects with the idea of progress...Consequently it is assumed that anyone who states a fact (even without passing judgment on it) is, therefore, in favor of it." (p xv) He later explodes the use of statistics, especially in evaluating the effects of propaganda (p 275).

Ellul states he is in favor of democracy and notes the danger propaganda poses to it (and propaganda's effectiveness within it, despite the illusions of some): "man is terribly malleable, uncertain of himself, ready to accept and to follow many suggestions, and is tossed about by all the winds of doctrine...I can only regret that propaganda renders the true exercise of [democracy] almost impossible." (p xvi)

He notes propaganda's work within mass society: people share in newspapers, television, movies, etc., individually yet as part of a mass of people doing the same thing. If propagandists address people as a mass, the individuals reject it; "On the contrary, each one must feel individualized, each must have the impressions that he is being looked at, that he is being addressed personally." (p 8)

He also focuses extensively on propaganda's reliance on creating and manipulating myths to influence people's actions on a basic level: "It furnishes him with a complete system for explaining the world, and provides immediate incentives to action...Through the myth it creates, propaganda imposes a complete range of intuitive knowledge, susceptible of only one interpretation, unique and one-sided, and precluding any divergence...by its very nature, it excludes contradiction and discussion." (p 11) Propaganda incorporates itself into education and the rewriting of history (p 14). Although Ellul defines propaganda in terms of actions (vice alleged beliefs or attitudes) from propagandees, he notes the importance of pre-propaganda to make people more open to the propaganda of action, things which depict the targeted messages in favorable light (p 15).

Given propaganda's reliance on myth, which draws from existing ideas and attitudes of a group, Ellul notes the difficulty in targeting a group from outside (propaganda against an enemy population in wartime, for instance) and the superiority of working from the inside, as through locally-established chapters or parties, much the way the Soviet Union worked through indigenous Communist parties in democratic countries.

Ellul notes action commits a person to a given propaganda, "He who acts in obedience to propaganda can never go back. He is now obliged to believe in that propaganda because of his past action. He is obliged to receive from it his justification and authority, without which his action will seem to him absurd or unjust, which would be intolerable...Often he has broken with his milieu or family; he may be compromised." (p 29)

Throughout the work, Ellul notes the harmful effect of propaganda per se on man, regardless of its specific goals or content. Perhaps he best explains this effect here:

Propaganda does not aim to elevate man, but to make him serve. It must therefore utilize the most common feelings, the most widespread ideas, the crudest patterns, and in so doing place itself on a very low level with regard to what it wants man to do and to what end. Hate, hunger, and pride make better levers of propaganda than do love or impartiality. (p 38)

Ellul points out the superficiality of propaganda, its need to stay abreast of current terms, ideas, and fads to motivate people. In reciprocal manner, propaganda seeks to keep people moving with the current, so as to prevent reflection, "To the extent that propaganda is based on current news, it cannot permit time for thought

or reflection. A man caught up in the news must remain on the surface of the event; he is carried along the current...Such a man never stops to investigate any one point, any more than he will tie together a series of news events." (p 46) Propaganda relies on presenting facts that may be true but difficult to verify, or facts that lack context, i.e., an increase of 15 percent (compared to what? when?) (p 55).

Busy people do not think too much and are the easier to manipulate, "those who think, establish the schedules, or set the norms, never act--and those who act must do so according to rules, patterns, and plans imposed on them from outside. Above all, they must not reflect on their actions. They cannot do so anyhow, because of the speed with which they work...According to propaganda, it is useless, even harmful for man to think; thinking prevents him from acting with the required righteousness and simplicity." (p 180)

Ellul stresses the importance of education and culture for people to be susceptible to the more developed forms of propaganda; the poor and uneducated being susceptible mainly to only short-term agitation propaganda. But the educated people tell themselves, "'Of course we shall not be victims of propaganda because we are capable of distinguishing truth from falsehood.' Anyone holding that conviction is extremely susceptible to propaganda, because when propaganda does tell the 'truth,' he is then convinced that it is no longer propaganda; moreover, his self-confidence makes him all the more vulnerable to attacks of which he is unaware." (p 52) So while Ellul ties modern propaganda into the industrial era, as part of technological mass society, I would go back at least as far as the Protestant Reformation. The idea that any one person can read for himself and decide (the Bible, in that instance) being preposterous--what one person could in one lifetime? First of all, what he reads has been collected, edited, decided upon, and translated by others, meaning the person's conclusion is all but foregone by those that assembled the "facts" upon which the person "decides for himself." The Reformation also came hand in hand with a gradual rise of a middle class in Europe, which was precisely the group of people that felt confident enough to read and decide and go on doing so today (in all topics), even when they hopelessly lack the skills or the time to penetrate beyond what has been carefully presented to them by others.

Ellul observes "the propagandist must insist on the purity of his own intentions and, at the same time, hurl accusations at his enemy...he will accuse him of the very intention he himself has and of trying to commit the very crime that he himself is about to commit. He who wants to provoke a war not only proclaims his own peaceful intentions but also accuses the other party of provocation." (p 58)

He notes the relative simplicity of using agitation propaganda (agitprop), especially that based on hatred, as "hatred once provoked continues to reproduce itself." (p 73) It is integration propaganda that is much harder to achieve and usually requires the elevation of a population's level of education and culture in order to be effective (p 106). "The vast majority of people, perhaps 90 percent, know how to read, but do not exercise their intelligence beyond this...As the people do not possess enough knowledge to reflect and discern, they believe--or disbelieve--in toto what they read. And as such people, moreover, will select the easiest, not the hardest, reading matter, they are precisely on the level at which the printed word can seize and convince them without opposition. They are perfectly adapted to propaganda." (p 109)

Yet Ellul shows that an individual in mass society actually demands integration propaganda as a coping tool (along the lines of the "Everything is Awesome" scene in the Lego Movie). He explains, "the first move toward liberation of the individual is to break up the small groups that are an organic fact of the entire society...a mass society can only be based on individuals--that is, on men in their isolation, whose identities are determined by their relationships with one another." (p 90) He even notes those organs of traditional society try to hang on by use of modern propaganda and so negate themselves (p 98). "We are thus face to face with a dual need: the need on the part of regimes to make propaganda, and the need of the propagandee...Propaganda is needed in the exercise of power for the simple reason that the masses have

come to participate in political affairs." (p 121)

Ellul posits public opinion cannot drive government policy, so government propaganda must mold public opinion to policy:

Does the State then obey and express and follow that opinion? Our unequivocal answer is that even in a democratic State it does not. Such obeisance by the State to public opinion is impossible--first, because of the very nature of public opinion, and second, because of the nature of modern political activities...no sooner would government begin to pursue certain aims favored in an opinion poll, than opinion would turn against it...Ergo: even in a democracy, a government that is honest, serious, benevolent, and respects the voter cannot follow public opinion. But it cannot escape it either...Only one solution is possible: as the government cannot follow opinion, opinion must follow the government. (p 124-126)

In this process, Ellul lays out his criticism of Liberalism generally, "a great difference nevertheless exists between them [theory and practice of individualism]. In individualist theory the individual has eminent value, man himself is the master of life; in the individualist reality each human being is subject to innumerable forces and influences, and is not at all master of his own life." (p 91) Nor does Ellul accept that a plurality of propagandas leave an individual to choose, rather likening it to a boxer hit by a left hook becoming groggier, not normal, when then hit by a right. (p 181) The assault of propaganda upon the dignity of man is such that in a democratic country "the citizen can repeat indefinitely 'the sacred formulas of democracy' while acting like a storm trooper," (p 256) a phenomenon we can see at work today in the vitriol and even violence of our debates.

Ellul shows that in modern mass society, people rely on intermediaries for their information (hearkening back to the problem of the Reformation that I pointed out earlier), they can only express their opinion through channels (elections, parties, associations, media, etc.), and public opinion "is formed by a very large number of people who cannot possibly experience the same fact in the same fashion, who judge it by different standards, speak a different language, and share neither the same culture nor the same social position...This is possible only when all these people are not really apprised of the facts, but only of abstract symbols that give the facts a shape in which they can serve as a base for public opinion...Therefore, public opinion always rests on problems that do not correspond to reality." (p 101)

Ellul observes the need for "concentration in a few hands of a large number of media" for propaganda to be effective, whether state or private monopoly (p 103), along the lines of C.S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*. One might question how the horizontal expansion of media via the internet might change this situation, but thanks to government censorship and control, whether the Great Firewall of China or submitting the internet to the control of the FCC via "net neutrality" (aka telephone regulations from 1934), this dilemma seems to have been eliminated already.

The modern citizen is caught between his desire to participate and his practical inability to do so competently, and therefore demanding and accepting propaganda helps him bridge this gap, "the individual wants to participate in other ways than just elections...He wants to form an opinion on foreign policy. But in reality he can't...Public opinion surveys reveal that people have opinions even on the most complicated questions, except for a small minority...The majority prefers expressing stupidities to not expressing any opinion...The more complex, general, and accelerated political and economic phenomena become, the more do individuals feel concerned, the more do they want to get involved...the individual does not want information, but only value judgments and preconceived positions." (p 139-140) Further:

nor can he accept the idea that the problems, which sprout all around him, cannot be solved, or that he

himself has no value as an individual and is subject to the turn of events. The man who keeps himself informed needs a framework in which all this information can be put in order; he needs explanations and comprehensive answers to general problems; he needs coherence. And he needs an affirmation of his own worth. (p 146)

Continuing his other work on mass society, Ellul depicts it so: "That loneliness inside the crowd is perhaps the most terrible ordeal of modern man; that loneliness in which he can share nothing, talk to nobody, and expect nothing from anybody...Propaganda is the true remedy for loneliness...propaganda is the signal to act, the bridge from the individual's mere interest in politics to his political action. It serves to overcome collective passivity." (p 148)

Ellul not only examines propaganda's role and function in democracy, but examines its use and role in Nazi Germany and Communist states. His inquiry into Mao's use of it led to this explanation of the "democratic" method used by Communists:

a man knows the absolute truth. He poses problems for which there are solutions. He encourages objections (in a limited circle). The discussion that follows does not have as its aim the common search for truth or a plan based on the opinions of all, which will take shape gradually. The aim of the discussion is to use the opposition and to drain the opponents of their energy and their convictions. Its aim is to "work over" every member of the group until, fully and of his own free will, he adheres to a proposition declared to be the absolute truth by the leader. (p 309)

In this one is reminded of the conclusion to George Orwell's 1984.

As for heroes, "The cult of the hero is the absolutely necessary complement of the massification of society...The individual who is prevented by circumstances from becoming a real person, who can no longer express himself through personal thought or action, who finds his aspirations frustrated, projects onto the hero all he would wish to be." (p 172)

Propaganda is durable precisely owing to its irrational character: "The individual now has a set of prejudices and beliefs, as well as objective justifications...Every new idea will therefore be troublesome to his entire being...Propaganda has created in him a system of opinions and tendencies which may not be subjected to criticism...He feels personally attacked when these certainties are attacked...the man who has been successfully subjected to a vigorous propaganda will declare that all new ideas are propaganda." (p 166) Which is not to say that a person cannot be successively won over from one group to another via propaganda, Ellul lays out that process as well (p 190).

Ellul is sharp about the qualifications of the propagandist himself, the need to stand aloof from belief, "He cannot even share that ideology for he must use it as an object and manipulate it without the respect that he would have for it if he believed in it." (p 197)

Ellul shows that propaganda can be effective even when only a skeleton, hardening opinion on just a few key points, but over time, groups crystallize around these key points, opinions become more general and lose detail and nuance (p 204-205). He shows, along these lines, how the needs of propaganda tend to lead to binary arrangements in public opinion, like two-party systems, both because the massive resources required for successful propaganda eliminates a multitude of organizations, and opinions tend to become boiled down to yes-no, for-against, etc. (p 219).

In short, an excellent (if sometimes challenging and dry) work, a guide not only to modern propaganda, but a

penetrating insight into modern society more broadly. Read *The Abolition of Man* then read this!

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### **Jake M. says**

This is among the few books to alter how I think of how the world presents itself. Ellul has a talent for presenting complex ideas in readable text. The book focuses on the conditions, uses, mediums, structures and belief systems needed for propaganda to flourish. In addition, he identifies a working definition of propaganda that is repeated throughout the text to remind the reader of its ever-present influence in our daily lives. This is as much a dissection of propaganda as it is a warning against homogenized idealistic constructions such as "western democracy" and its supposed infallibility - well done on all fronts.

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### **Mark Gring says**

Jacques Ellul's book is what I consider the definitive work, thus far, on propaganda. I have not found another text that covers this topic so well as he. The work is comprehensive, thoughtful, subtle, and historical-philosophical.

First, Ellul himself is an interesting enigma. He is born into a historic (reformed) Christian home but accepts a more neo-orthodox (Karl Barth, et al) perspective along with an extreme libertarian political perspective. He ends up with what he defines as "Christian Anarchy" but not the nineteenth century type of anarchy that most of us presume--he is very adamant that he does not accept that political perspective. As such, I would contend that he is both theologically neo-orthodox and politically libertarian (extreme) but with a nod toward a classical Marxist perspective on the problems faced by 20th century societies. All of these larger perspectives are brought to bear on how he understands and interprets propaganda.

Ellul contends early in the text that there is no way to study propaganda in an academic, social science, experimental, or controlled way. There are too many sociological, philosophical, interpersonal and economic dimensions that come into play all at once to ever be able to replicate it in a controlled academic setting. Thus, he examines it from an historical and philosophical (with a sociological twist) perspective.

Do not get this text if you want a simplistic (either too positive, like Edward Bernays, or too negative--a grand conspiracy) view of propaganda. You will not get that from this French sociologist-philosopher. Ellul's is a complex and subtle view of propaganda that operates both overtly and covertly on multiple levels. He defines propaganda (p.62) "Propaganda is a set of methods (technique) employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions (praxis) of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization." This is the dark side of persuasion--in fact I would argue that is is NOT persuasion because it is overt and covert manipulation that attempts to remove agency from its audience.

Ellul's understanding of propaganda cannot be understood apart from his idea of "technique." This idea is explained in his prior book that is mistranslated and mis-titled as "The Technological Society." Ellul argues that societies have given up religion as the way to organize and thus we give ourselves over to various techniques, various systems, that organize life for us. Since these systems are incomplete, we need to "lubricate them" via the controls from propaganda. In fact, he contends, 20th century society cannot operate and survive without some form of propaganda. Ellul argues that there are also 3 major, and very different, types of propaganda that come from the 3 major systems of his day: Soviet Union, China, and the United States. All three of these have very different types of propaganda but they all serve their various subsistent countries in the needed ways to maintain the "technique"--the particular way of seeing and acting in the



world.

I would love to see someone chart out the categories of propaganda (pp 61-87) that show how propaganda operates on various continuums (continui?) including: Political--Sociological (education); Agitation--Integration; Vertical--Horizontal; and Rational--Irrational.

Ellul's view of propaganda is complex, fascinating, and ultimately chilling. According to Ellul, propaganda is the system we have brought on ourselves because we have rejected the simple understanding of the Christian gospel that brings both freedom and restraint to the individual. Instead, we prefer our slavery because we always hope we can be the ones to manipulate others (my words, not his). Ultimately, Ellul sees that propaganda has a life-changing, devastating effect on those who live under its system. Freedom from it is a faint hint, at best.

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### **Erin says**

I'm actually reading this right now, so I'll update this as I am amazed and transformed by this highly underappreciated and brilliant Frenchman.

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### **Adam Ross says**

An interesting book on the way in which comprehensive propaganda is employed in the modern world (a bit dated now, but still good and helpful, covering ground others have ignored). Ellul is a Christian as well, so his approach is more interesting than just an academic approach to the subject.

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### **Michael S says**

Scary, scary, scary.

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### **Lynn Waddell says**

This book is the most influential of my career in journalism, and one of the top 10 of my life. I read it almost 20 years ago, and I often reflect on it. It changed the way I analyze news media, politicians, and marketing. Although written in the 1960s, the components essential to propaganda that he outlines hold true. Given the weighty subject matter, it isn't a quick read, more one to pause and contemplate over coffee before moving to next chapter. Even still, Ellul's extreme passion for his theories at times made me chuckle.

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### **Vivian says**

I had every intention of reviewing this, but time started to get away from me, I couldn't read it all before returning it, but I decided to skim the contents to see if I wanted to request it again at a later time. And what I found was something completely unexpected, a story within a book. Shared spaces allow for intersections,

sometime across space and time.

The book contained significant handwritten notes, marginalia, throughout the text and it told a story. Clearly a critique, but also a voice that would never know if it found an audience. This page was the one that propelled me to read all the notes.

If you're interested, please see the following link for the complete story: [A Story Within a Book](#)

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### **Brian says**

This is the third book concerning technology and society that really changed the way I think about the world. As with *The Technological Society* and Mumford's *Pentagon of Power*, this book contains many ideas and concepts that turn our normal worldviews upside down. He states that Propaganda is necessary for modern societies to function and that they play an integral part in the power structures that run them. This is all the more true for our modern, so-called Democracies. He also states that the more highly educated and up-to-date one is the more one is a victim of Propaganda. This runs contrary to what most people think, but if you read the book I think you will agree. The more exposure one has to mass media the more one will be propagandized. It is necessary to read his notion of what Propaganda is in order for this to make sense - it is not the simple thing most people think it is. It is part of current complex social relations involving media and the political, economic and technological forces which influence and control them. The end result is that we ourselves are influenced and controlled to a far greater extent than we realize. What we view as normal and right and even possible is contained within a construct that both uses and requires Propaganda to function. Like *The Technological Society*, it can be rather depressing, but then one must look for the holes in the net and seek out ways to counteract these influences.

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### **Ietrio says**

As probably most products of the French educational system Ellul proves to be an intellectual fraud. Like Bergson who used to base his ramblings about life on popular drama characters he had seen in a play the night before, Ellul describes life on what he has seen on TV the night before. E. g. the last annex that describes as real an imaginary technique of "brainwashing." No wonder France is a top consumer of Homeopathy. Yet, somehow, his literary and rhetoric technique are good enough to convince other equally qualified people that his blend of TV and newspaper virtual reality are THE reality. Not surprising, given how many people debate the Government's best path to achieve protection from anything ranging from fleas to terrorist attacks.

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### **Joyce says**

I think I was halfway in reading this book before I got it, (a good thing I did too because it was required for school) and when I did, there is nothing like that feeling. It will challenge you and stretch your mind and thinking.

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## David says

Wow. My biggest take-away from this book is a question - what would Ellul say today? Because the way he talked about the power of propaganda, what it does to people and the threat it is to democracy and thought seems incredibly relevant to today. Ellul books are always a bit tough, but certainly worth it. He defies many definitions of propaganda, saying that propaganda actually uses facts, not lies as most think. Also, rather than uneducated people being susceptible to it, it is the most educated who are. It is not that propaganda seeks to convince you to believe something new, instead it focuses on action. And it also hardens your commitment to a group more than seeking to get you to believe something new. Finally, it is everywhere - from movies to TV to newspapers to, if Ellul was living today, social media. Propaganda is so powerful because it is nearly everywhere. It is scary because it influences all of us, those of us most certain we are not propagandized are perhaps just tricking ourselves.

Two of my favorite quotes from the book are:

"Those who read the press of their group and listen to the radio of their group are constantly reinforced in their allegiance. They learn more and more that their group is right, that its actions are justified; thus their beliefs are strengthened. At the same time, such propaganda contains elements of criticism and refutation of other groups, which will never be read or heard by a member of another group...This double foray on the part of propaganda, proving the excellence of one's own group and the evilness of the others, produces an increasingly stringent partitioning of our society...Thus we see before our eyes how a world of closed minds establishes itself, a world in which everybody talks to himself, everybody constantly views his own certainty about himself and the wrongs done him by the Others - a world in which nobody listens to anybody else, everybody talks and nobody listens"

"To the extent that propaganda is based on current news, it cannot permit time for thought or reflection. A man caught up in the news must remain on the surface of the event; he is carried along in the current, and can at no time take a respite to judge and appreciate; he can never stop to reflect. There is never any awareness -- of himself, of his condition, of his society -- for the man who lives by current events. Such a man never stops to investigate any one point, any more than he will tie together a series of news events...And, in fact, modern man does not think about current problems; he feels them. He reacts, but he does not understand them any more than he takes responsibility for them. He is even less capable of spotting any inconsistency between successive facts; man's capacity to forget is unlimited. This is one of the most important and useful points for the propagandist, who can always be sure that a particular propaganda theme, statement, or event will be forgotten within a few weeks. Moreover, there is a spontaneous defensive reaction in the individual against an excess of information and -- to the extent that he clings (unconsciously) to the unity of his own person -- against inconsistencies. The best defense here is to forget the preceding event. In so doing, man denies his own continuity; to the same extent that he lives on the surface of events and makes today's events his life by obliterating yesterday's news, he refuses to see the contradictions in his own life and condemns himself to a life of successive moments, discontinuous and fragmented"

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