© Best Version Media

BY RICHARD ELLIS

A Flaming Pile of Wit

Propaganda is a timeless tradition of U.S. election season whereby candidates create and disseminate new "facts." This happens at all levels of politics, even in local elections here on the Wasatch Back. Admittedly, I've ghostwritten a lot of corporate propaganda (and some political). That is why I feel a duty to address this topic and its impact on our culture, which, to me, looks increasingly like a flaming pile of wit.



Propaganda is an ancient practice that was modernized under Edward Bernays, today known as the father of the public relations industry. An American military propagandist during World War I, Bernays repurposed his psychological arsenal in the service of corporate profits and talked about the how and why of it in a book, Crystalizing Public Opinion, published in 1923.

Bernays popularized the idea that sooner or later, every powerful entity and organization in America would have a PR counsel advocating for its position. Propaganda would become relativistic. "The only difference between 'propaganda' and 'education,' really, is in the point of view," Bernays wrote. "The advocacy of what we believe in is education. The advocacy of what we don't believe in is propaganda."

Bernays based this on several keen insights about individual and group psychology. First, people tend to form extremely confident beliefs based on scant information. For instance, we listen to one

TEAM CHEEVER
PLUMBING + HEATING

Call us for all of your residential and commercial plumbing & heating needs.

Licensed and Insured Master Plumber & General Contractor based in Park City, Utah.

"Five stars ! Excellent customer service and communication. Everything is online and transparent and work is impeccable!" - Cory C.

"Our experience with Jonathan and his team has been great! Excellent communication and quality, professional service. Highly recommend!" - Ellen A.

Read more reviews on our website!



Let's talk about your plumbing and heating needs.

www.teamcheever.net

435-252-7697

© Best Version Media

podcast and suddenly believe we're experts on tariffs or interest rates. Thus, wrote Bernays, "The public relations counsel must deal with the fact that persons who have little knowledge of a subject almost invariably form definite and positive judgments upon that subject."

Second, we have a "herd" instinct that pressures us to adopt and defend the beliefs of our group (political or otherwise). We're wired to seek belonging and avoid rejection because ~100,000 years of hunter gatherer history selected for that trait. To change opinions, the propagandists must target the herd leaders: celebrities, journalists, and other influencers.

Third, effective propaganda caters to the reptilian brain, which deals with basic survival functions. "The refinements of reason and the shadings of emotion cannot reach a considerable public," Bernays argued, some 90 years before smartphones downgraded our attentional capacity to goldfish levels.

Bernays, to be fair, was an elitist in a world where relatively few people had influence over mass media. Especially on TV, they could afford to deliver somewhat reasoned, boring material. What else were you going to watch?

Now that anyone can compete for attention with a free social media account and a smartphone, the "refinements of reason and the shadings of emotion" are completely out the window. Instead, the witting and unwitting propagandists compete with, well, wit.

A comedian who knows nothing about Middle Eastern politics goes on The Joe Rogan Experience and says cheeky, memorable things about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that seem true only because they sound clever.

The Gavin Newsom Press Office turns its entire X (formerly Twitter) account into a satire bit, written in POTUS's voice, mocking him and his policies.

A United States Senator on social media attempts and fails to make a "sick burn" about a political assasination in another state; and the pushback is that he did so distastefully.

YouTube aggregators and even professional news outlets post videos showing their group's hero "owning" or "destroying" the other side, mostly with witty rhetoric.

Whatever happens in the news, there is someone on X, Instagram, or TikTok with a hilarious hot take. To me, it feels like we're all in a WWE wrestling match, and our favorite influencers are ringside saying, "Hey, you! Take this chair and hit your uncle in the head with it." It's wit as weaponry, not as a tool for humor, reflection, or insight.

I'd wager that Americans now invest more in witty takes on problems than solving those problems. That, to me, is how a society becomes a flaming pile of wit. Propaganda takes precedence over problem solving; attention worthiness becomes a barometer for truth.

Which brings us back to elections. How do we handle all the witty "educators" and "propagandists"?

Skip the Facebook and Instagram shorts where a conservative "owns the libs" or a liberal "destroys" a conservative. That's WWE. Skip the pundits who offer simplistic, grievance-laden solutions to complex problems. Skip the content that makes you feel overconfident in your opinions.

Instead, show up at council meetings where the boring but important stuff is discussed and decided. Read longform journalism and commentary that expresses doubt rather than certainty in how to fix societal problems. Most difficult of all, try to question, counter, and scrutinize your own beliefs. It's ok to change your mind. It's ok to like an idea the other side endorses. It's ok to say, "I don't know."

It's ok not to have the hottest, wittiest, meanest take. All those "sick burns" leave behind is ash.



Give your home the protection it deserves.

Bryan R Daybell Ins Agcy Inc
Bryan Daybell, Agent
1960 Sidewinder Drive
Park City, UT 84060
Bus: 435-649-9161

Your home is where you make some of your best memories, and that's worth protecting. I'm here to help.
LET'S TALK TODAY.

StateFarm®

State Farm Fire and Casualty Company, State Farm General Insurance Company, Bloomington, IL
State Farm Florida Insurance Company, Winter Haven, FL
1708136 State Farm Lloyds, Richardson, TX

CELEBRATING OUR 40TH ANNIVERSARY!

24 HOUR EMERGENCY SERVICE



WE ARE YOUR HOME TOWN APPLIANCE, FURNITURE & MATTRESS STORE

We service & sell most major brands of appliances:

- Washers
- Dryers
- Refrigerators
- Freezers
- Dishwashers
- Ranges
- Microwaves
- Barbecues
- Water Softeners

VIKING · Thermador · FLEXSTEEL HOME · ASHLEY · Serta · jmf · MONOGRAM · SUB-ZERO · ah aspenhome · BOSCH · WOLF

435-654-4623 Heber City | 435-649-8012 Park City
www.heberappliance.com

Come See Our Showroom:
600 North Main St · Heber City, UT 84032