

Responding to Terrorism using Ethical Means: The Propaganda Index

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Determining whether communication is as ethical as possible involves assessment of means (texts, language, and communication style) as well as ends (communication intent and outcomes). This article introduces the propaganda index as a way to achieve the former. A tool that measures whether texts contain stylistic devices that have been elsewhere identified as classically propagandist, the index is first overviewed then applied to a case study text: the Australian Government "terror kit" information package. The case study analysis, combined with some background to the kit's reception in Australia, indicates that the high levels of propaganda were probably not helpful to the kit in achieving its aims either ethically or effectively.

Public communicators face a range of difficult challenges after September 11, 2001 (9/11). In particular, many governments and public authorities, including in the USA, Canada, Europe, and Australia, have seen a need to issue official "terrorism information packages." Communication theory offers useful risk communication guidelines for developing such documents (e.g., Argenti, 2002; Gray & Ropeik, 2002), however most of the literature is teleologically focused; that is, concerned chiefly with audience outcomes such as attitude and behaviour change. While undoubtedly a key challenge for such information is balancing potentially conflicting aims to increase public preparedness and reduce anxiety, and communication theory helps negotiate this dilemma (e.g., Wray, Kreuter, Jacobsen, Clements, & Evans, 2004) there is also a role for communication theory that focuses on means; that is, the texts, language, and techniques of "terrorism information" documents themselves, particularly the ethics of those means. If the highest standard of ethical communication is understood as involving both ethical ends and ethical means, communication theory also has a role guiding communication practitioners to assess their methods and messages.

This article reports on an 18-month research project to develop a simple "propaganda index" that measures levels and types of propaganda content in texts. It is argued that communicators could make "terrorism information" materials and other potentially controversial public communication outputs more ethical and effective by ensuring propagandistic means are minimized.

Theorizing Propaganda

The propaganda index proposed here is based in theoretical understanding of propaganda as a particular type of defective argument; that is, argument containing what Toulmin (1958) terms claim and warrant, but lacking relevant supportive data. Propaganda is understood in this study as communication that uses a specific set of rhetorical devices and cognitive heuristics to make claims or assertions, and to generalize (often unstated) broader assumptions from those claims, without providing evidence. A rhetorical device that fits this description is the word "terrorist" itself; Severin and Tankard suggest that "two current examples of name calling [which they identify as a propaganda device] are terrorist and terrorism" (2001, pp. 112-113). They argue that each "side" in the terror/anti-terror debate could supply evidence of the other's activities that would qualify for such a label. Labelling, however, particularly once it has become widely accepted as having a certain meaning and connotation, means evidence is not presented and examined on each occasion, but taken as "read."

In popular understanding, propaganda means deliberately deceptive communication (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991). However, propaganda theory has distinguished between "black" propaganda (untruthfulness or "card stacking," where slanted information is provided) and "gray" propaganda, which is not obviously untruthful but more subtly manipulative. This research project aimed to

better equip communicators to detect the latter propaganda type. Working from an assumption that, even where provided, “evidence” is always in some way “slanted” because truth is infinitely multiple, contested, and subjective, and there are always more voices that can be added to any debate, this research sought to supplement existing “is it truthful?” ethics checks (e.g., Baker & Martinson, 2001) by focusing attention on communicators’ styles. Do communicators, particularly in times of stress and violence, tend towards pluralist, evidence-based communication styles that offer data, research, history, context, and point readers to verifiable sources of information, or do they tend rather to resort to a familiar grab bag of propagandistic rhetorical devices?

The propaganda index detects a particular set of textual features that provide raw materials enabling heuristic (inferential) processing, but not data necessary for systematic (analytic and reasoned) processing (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989). Of course oppositional readings, including systematic analysis and processing of propaganda, are still possible (hence the index cannot predict audience reception), but only by reference to other sources of information. The index enables communicators to focus on their textual styles, and identify whether they are making claims that activate particular naturalized discourses, without data.

This rhetoric-based approach to propaganda departs from theoretical approaches that focus on communicator intent as the defining identifier of propaganda, for example Lasswell’s understanding of propaganda as all communication aiming to influence human action (1937), Lee and Lee’s understanding of propaganda as all communication designed to attain “predetermined ends” whether harmful or beneficial (1939, p. 15), or Pratkanis and Aronson’s (1991) definition of propaganda as any deliberate mass influence. However, this study’s textual analysis approach accords with prominent propaganda scholars such as Black (2001) who have suggested that, because communicator intent is inherently difficult to determine or confirm, a focus on textual criteria, rather than communicator intent or audience response, is productive. Assessing texts and textual manoeuvres at least enables consistent conclusions as to whether propaganda is stylistically present or absent, regardless of whether that presence is then judged appropriate in particular circumstances or contexts, or what its aims might be speculated to be. This study’s challenge was to identify what particular rhetorical devices typically characterized propaganda, and devise a reliable means of measuring their presence.

Propaganda’s Stylistic Features

Black’s (2001) review of propaganda theory identified “closed mindedness” as a repeated concept. He proposed a new definition of propaganda, based on the presence of three rhetorical characteristics exemplifying closure: “simplified, pat answers (usually relayed by ‘authoritative sources’);” “a world in which the good guys and the bad guys are readily identifiable;” and “simplistic and direct connection between causes and effects” (p. 129). Other researchers using rhetorical criteria included Lee and Lee, whose overall understanding of propaganda was based in intent, but whose 1939 study nonetheless listed seven textual devices they believed signalled such intent; name-calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon.

In seeking to develop a reliable and simple propaganda index, this research took the Lees’ list as its starting point (excluding card stacking, which was eliminated from the outset because the research did not aim to check data accuracy to detect black propaganda but was rather assessing rhetorical style for gray propaganda), but also undertook, through an emic coding process, to allow other heuristic rhetorical devices that fitted Black’s description to emerge. Pilot testing indicated that the Lees’ categories as defined in their words were unreliable, but after 18 months’ testing and refinement, the categories outlined in Table 1 proved reliable and stable. Different analysis units were tested and Holsti’s “themes”—“a single assertion about some subject” (1969, p. 116)—were

most reliable. Coders therefore split the text into actions, perceivers, actors, and targets (c.f., Weber, 1990), then pre-tested and nominated further splits if units remained that were not discrete (in line with Gottschalk et al.'s emic approach allowing coders to define units for analysis before formal coding begins, cited in Neuendorf, 2002). In the case study below, this process resulted in 267 agreed clauses before formal coding commenced (c.f., Tilley, 2004 for further method detail including limitations).

Table 1 Propaganda Index: Propaganda Content Analysis Categories and Descriptors

Device	Description
Name-calling (NC)	Negative or "bad" labels or stereotypes (e.g., terrorists, extremists, fanatics, ferals, "rent-a-crowd") that encourage a summary negative response without examining history, complexity, or evidence related to an issue
Glittering generality (GG)	Abstract positive labeling using virtue connotators (e.g., intelligence for covert surveillance); positive-sounding euphemisms (e.g., collateral damage and friendly fire for civilian or own-troop deaths; biosolids for sewerage); broadly affirmative unverifiable adjectives (e.g. state-of-the-art, high-tech); positive abstractions (e.g., prosperity, freedom, rights, democracy, respect, common sense); vagaries (e.g., significantly increasing or highly trained, where the level of increase or training is not defined); subjective adjectives or adverbs (beautiful, stunning) which give positive effect without evidence
Transfer positive (TP)	Process of association whereby the "good" of one thing rubs off onto something else, (e.g., through appropriation of symbolic objects such as national flags or anthem, sponsorship, celebrity or "expert" endorsement)
Transfer negative (TN)	Express or implied association with negative incidents, places, people, or symbols to "rub off" negative qualities to the issue being discussed or discredit by implication an opposing viewpoint (e.g., may have links with Al Qaida, has been seen in the company of known terrorists, etc)
Plain folks (PF)	Implication that ideas are "of the people" (e.g., references to family values, hard working, decent folk, everyday mums and dads, average Australians, ordinary people, normal people, or middle Australia). PF is a values-based device that implies normalcy or rationality for an opinion and thereby demonizes other views as aberrant and unreasonable, even if they are majority
Band wagon (BW)	Peer pressure or spiral of silence device (e.g. implication that everyone, most people, many people or any large collectivized group of people such as our school, our company, or our neighborhood thinks a particular, singular, and uniform way). Includes references to imagined communities such as states, nations, organizations, and phrases such as we, our, all, everybody, that invite solidarity with an implied large and inclusive group, suggest mass support for an opinion, marginalize alternative views as minority, suggest collective ownership of and responsibility for the actions of a group (e.g., "our army") or obscure internal division within any group
Manifest Destiny (MD)	Deterministic invocation of God (of any kind or faith), destiny, fate, natural processes, or universal design, to lend support to an argument; removal of accountability for an idea or issue from individuals and attribution of responsibility to deterministic "greater forces" (God's will, karma, tradition, luck, History, Nature)
Other (O)	A phrase that appears either neutral, with no rhetorical or persuasive effect, or persuasive but does not fit into any of the above categories

A Case Study Application; The Australian “Terror Kit” Letter

Public response to the Australian government’s AU\$15 million National Security Public Information Campaign, launched in February, 2003, was immediate and heated. In media articles and letters to the editor, critics said the campaign, which included broadcast, print, and website advertising, and a booklet mailed to eight million households, “fuels prejudice and discrimination,” “is replete with vague platitudes,” and constituted a “scaremongering campaign, designed to create division and fear in the community and to justify the imminent slaughter of Iraqis” (Leone, 2003, p. 11). A recurring premise in public outcry was that the kits were propagandistic; an estimated 150,000 kits were returned unopened (Countdown to war, 2003), some with “propaganda” written across the covers. A newspaper editorial published 20 months later speculated, under the heading “Propaganda Pays Off” (2004), that the kits were among several “questionable public sector actions” that helped re-elect the incumbent conservative government.

For those who did open the kits, the first visible item was a two-page cover letter on parliamentary crest stationery, addressed to “dear fellow Australian” from Prime Minister John Howard. The letter commenced “I am writing to you because I believe you and your family should know more about some key issues affecting the security of our country and how we can all play a part in protecting our way of life” (Howard, 2003, p. 1). Subsequent paragraphs asserted the importance and expertise of the instructions in the booklet that followed. The letter provided a useful short text for testing and developing a propaganda index, but it also provided interesting results that supported critics’ claims the kits contained propaganda. Applied to Howard’s letter, the index indicated 62 % propaganda content. Glittering generality occurred most frequently (22 % of all clauses). Band wagon was next most common (17 %), then name-calling (9 %), transfer positive (7 %), plain folks (4 %), transfer negative (3 %), and one count of manifest destiny (<1 %). Intercoder reliability was calculated, using Cohen’s kappa, at 0.961. A short paragraph that occurred under the heading “our community” provides an example of the text’s propaganda content: “Australia is a strong and vigorous democracy. We value our individual rights and also respect our obligations to other Australians because we know that only by doing so can our security, prosperity, and freedom endure” (Howard, 2003, p. 2). Imagined, homogenized collectivities such as Australia, community, we, and our, were coded bandwagon, while positive but unverifiable abstractions such as strong, vigorous, democracy, security, prosperity, and freedom were coded glittering generality. Table 2, below, provides a range of examples from throughout the letter’s text to illustrate.

Discussion

The letter’s identified devices matched Black’s description of propaganda as closing down discussion (2001); labels, transfers, and bandwagon appeals are cognitive heuristics that encourage quick decisions and polarized, emotive responses without investigation of further evidence. The letter’s opposing positive and negative labels created a dichotomy in which the dominant positive orientator (in Burkean terminology the “God term”—c.f. Rueckert, 1982) was “security,” and opposing “Devil term” or negative orientator was “terror.” These two “broad, all-inclusive categories of in-groups (friends) and out-groups (enemies), beliefs and disbeliefs, and situations to be accepted or rejected in toto” (Black, 2001, p. 134) established an us/ them binary that blamed “terrorists” for Australian anxiety levels, without examining the situation’s roots. There is little room in a 62 % propagandistic text to explore whether Australian governments’ or officials’ actions had contributed to elevating either international protest risks or domestic anxiety levels. This seems typical of propaganda’s overall aim for “reduction of situations into simplistic and readily identifiable cause and effect relations, ignoring multiple causality of events” (Black, 2001, p. 134), but it was beyond this study’s scope to explore whether such a closing down of discussion was deliberate or what purposes it might serve. The index does not address whether suggestions that Australia is or is not a “terror” target are accurate, only what communication style is employed to make such suggestions. An inference that can be drawn about the appropriateness of propagandistic content in this instance,

however, comes from the furore and anger generated by the kit. Rather than a calming effect, significant distress was caused to, for example, postal workers, who were so concerned about the evident depth of public anger that they feared possible Anthrax contamination of returning kits, threatened to strike, and backed down only when special handling measures were introduced (Terror kit strike averted, 2003).

Table 2 Propaganda in the Terror Kit Letter

Device	Mean count in terror kit letter	Examples found in terror kit letter (Howard, 2003)
Name-calling (NC)	25	Terror (and variants terrorist, terrorism, etc.), sad fact, extremists, fanatics, atrocity, dangerous world, something terrible
Glittering generality (GG)	59	In large numbers, time and time again, well prepared, significantly increasing, security, prosperity, freedom, intelligence (to describe Australia's internal and external surveillance activities), defense (applied to military forces regardless of whether their activities are off-shore or defensive, for example, whether Australia's presence in Iraq is "defensive" is debatable rather than a given), individual rights, rights, democracy, respect, experts, specialists, highly trained, highly experienced, further upgraded, professional(s), state-of-the-art, common sense, good judgment, protection, protect, strong (e.g., strong . . . democracy, strong . . . society, strong . . . capability), vigorous, take necessary steps
Transfer positive (TP)	18	The Prime Minister; I (in the context of I am writing, I believe, I encourage, and other self-reference by the Prime Minister)
Transfer negative (TN)	7	September 11, Bali
Plain folks (PF)	10.5	Daily lives, references to neighborhoods, workplaces, families, and community
Band wagon (BW)	45.5	Our Special Forces, our economy, our community, our way of life, our country, our nation, all play our part, our shores, our obligations, and our open, friendly nature, we, us. We have to, all, everyone. The phrase small number of preceding fanatics was counted BW because it marginalized the other viewpoint (bandwagon by reverse implication)
Manifest destiny (MD)	1	Tradition
Other (O)	101	
Total	267	

Although it aimed to increase community preparedness, because the letter contained more heuristic content than evidence, it constrained readers' ability to process their responses to it through the central route; that is by assessing a balanced argument and arriving at a firmly held opinion. Those who angrily and abruptly returned the kits unopened acted on peripheral cues, such as media reports that the kit was propaganda, source credibility, their pre-existing beliefs, and the kit's outer style and format. Yet those who read the letter were also constrained by its heuristic style into using peripheral processing to assess its content. O'Keefe argues that the three major heuristics in peripheral processing are source credibility, liking, and consensus (O'Keefe, 1990). These equate to propaganda devices present in the kit such as positive transfer (credibility transferred from the Prime Minister and sources labelled terrorism "experts," liking transferred from a popular television celebrity who featured in the kit's photographs), plain folks (liking and consensus), and bandwagon

(consensus). Petty and Cacioppo's research indicates that peripheral processing can reinforce previously held beliefs, but where change is required results only in temporary attitude shifts that are highly susceptible to counter-persuasion and correlate with unpredictable behaviours (1986). While other research would be needed to measure this, it therefore seems unlikely that terror materials using propagandistic heuristics such as those in the Australian kit cover letter could achieve long-term changes to preparedness, anxiety, or other attitudes and behaviours.

Conclusions

The propaganda index helps clarify whether a text contains certain propaganda elements. It has proven popular with communication students, because it provides familiarity with simple language analysis, and an easier route into the more complex science of discourse analysis. Students comment that it increases their self-awareness, alerting them to hidden discourse and evasive communication strategies in their written and spoken communication. There are plans to include it in a forthcoming first year journalism textbook, to help increase journalism graduates' "flak-spotting" skills and train them to question and challenge propaganda in the media releases they receive. It may also prove useful for communication practitioners seeking to avoid propagandistic practice, particularly those working in publicly funded government communication. Even consulted as a qualitative guide, rather than using the quantitative method with which it was developed and tested, the propaganda index may help increase both ethics and effectiveness of "terror" and other sensitive information outputs. The propaganda index complements existing ethics checks which either require a reductionist determination of singular truthfulness, or focus primarily on communication ends, because it enables practitioners to also assess the ways those ends are attained and the means by which their particular "truths" or beliefs are communicated.

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