Media Argumentation

Dialectic, Persuasion, and Rhetoric

DOUGLAS WALTON

University of Winnipeg
A recurring problem for the normative analysis and evaluation of mass media argumentation is the use of the term “propaganda.” One of the most common forms of attack on, or negative criticism of, rhetorical argumentation used in mass media is to label it as propaganda. What frequently happens is that arguments are automatically dismissed as irrational or fallacious, as soon as they are categorized as propaganda. This form of dismissal is especially evident in textbooks on logic and critical thinking, where forms of argument are frequently evaluated as fallacious using the term “propaganda.” In this chapter, I critically question such a policy of automatic dismissal of arguments used in propaganda. I will seek out a better method of evaluating such arguments, so that evaluations can be supported or refuted on a case-by-case basis by employing clearly stated criteria that can be used to assess the textual evidence given in the particular case. This method could be called an evidence-based approach.

One of the thorniest problems is to define the term “propaganda” or at least to grapple with the contradictions that appear in its current usage. One of the results of this chapter is a proposed set of criteria for the identification of propaganda as a type of discourse. Ten defining characteristics (as well as several other typical properties) of propaganda as an identifiable type of discourse will be set out and argued for. A second task addressed is how mass media argumentation used in what is called propaganda should be analyzed. Some advice is given on how to analyze argumentation dialectically in propaganda and how to reconstruct certain types of arguments that are central to mass persuasion attempts.
commonly identified with propaganda. But the main problem addressed, and the most difficult one, is how to evaluate mass media argumentation used as propaganda. The term “propaganda” has such negative connotations that people tend to see only the arguments of their opposition as describable with this label, as if their own arguments could never be. The aim of this chapter is to get us over this one-sided or dismissive approach to evaluating arguments allegedly used as propaganda, in order to bring us to a dialectical perspective that takes a balanced but evidence-based approach.

This chapter ties in very closely with chapter 6. In chapter 6 a much broader approach is taken by analyzing the wider category of arguments based on popular opinion, including arguments that might fairly be considered as falling under the heading of propaganda and other kinds of arguments based on popular opinion that would not be considered propaganda. The general topic of chapter 6 is the form of argument called appeal to popular opinion, or argumentum ad populum, as it is called in the logic textbooks. Any argument based on a generally accepted opinion is covered in this broad category, including arguments based on public opinion polls and arguments based on common knowledge. However, there is one special subtype of this more general type of argumentation that specifically cites mob appeal arguments, or arguments directed to the enthusiasms of the multitude. This type of argument is closely related to the literature on propaganda, and the latter topic is scarcely comprehensible without dealing with it. It is therefore treated in this chapter. However, the reader must keep in mind that the more general type of argument traditionally called appeal to popular opinion will be analyzed in chapter 6, based on the assumption that the mob appeal type of argument often fitted into this category will have already been treated in this chapter.

1. Negative Connotations

According to the account of the origin of the term “propaganda” given in Ellul (1967), the term originally referred to a committee of church officials called the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith). The name of this committee continued as the name given to previous meetings of Pope Gregory XIII with three cardinals in 1572–1585, which had the aim of combatting the Reformation. It may be presumed that in this original meaning, the term did not have the negative connotations it has now, at least for the Catholics.
who originated the term. However, it is also reasonable to assume that it would soon have taken on negative connotations for the Protestants who became aware of what the word meant to the Catholics. The committee had the purpose of advocating a particular point of view, or taking one side, on an important issue of church doctrine. And it had an interest at stake in doing so. Thus it is easy to see how the modern, negative connotations of the word “propaganda” developed from this original use of the term.

Marlin (1989, p. 47) tells us that the word “propaganda” was used by the Allies during both world wars to characterize only the opinion-forming activities of the enemy, treating these so-designated enemy activities as composed mostly of lies. These practices left the word with strongly negative connotations. However, “here and there” in the literature on propaganda, according to Marlin, “one finds voices trying to rehabilitate the word for neutral usage.” The negative connotations are so deeply entrenched, however, and the word is so charged with negative emotive connotations that the word itself is frequently used as a verbal weapon to attack views or arguments one is opposed to or wishes to condemn as not being rationally compelling. The strong negative connotations attached to the word “propaganda” imply that such discourse is both unethical and illogical. The ethical aspect implies intentional deception and manipulation of a mass audience. The logical or dialectical aspect implies that the argumentation used is not based on good evidence of the kind appropriate for a rational discussion, and instead is of an emotional and crowd-pleasing sort.

As Marlin noted, the word “propaganda,” as used in the modern English-speaking world, still has the strong negative connotations set in place by its use in the two world wars. Politicians and bureaucrats would definitely avoid this term to describe their own public relations and promotional activities, using it only to describe those of their opponents. Generally, to describe any discourse or message as propaganda is to downgrade it by suggesting that the information content of the message, or its usefulness as reliable evidence, is suspect. The use of this word even suggests that the message referred to is intentionally manipulative and deceptive. For example, to describe a story in a newspaper or a televised report as propaganda would be to say that the story or report is not an objective presentation of the facts, not a balanced account of both sides of an issue. It would be classified as a biased argument with a spin that advocates some cause or particular viewpoint or interest. Generally, to say that something is propaganda is to say that it is the output of some
interest group or organization that is pushing a particular viewpoint in a way designed to promote it to a mass audience.

But the negative connotations of the term are not universal. As Marlin (1989, p. 47) reminded us, Lenin and Goebbels did not mind its being used to describe their own activities of molding public opinions. The Russian usage seems to have persisted despite the Allies’ use of the term in World War II to refer only to the enemy opinion-forming activities, presumed to be manipulative lies designed to deceive a gullible public that did not have access to free media. So the word has a mixed quality. It is generally negative in its connotations. The negative aspect seems to be at least partly logical in nature, suggesting that the discourse in question is somehow untrustworthy, deceptive, or not a kind of argumentation that is based on a balanced consideration of the evidence relevant to the issue being discussed. Also, there is a negative ethical implication to the effect that propaganda is intentionally manipulative, and involves lying or dishonesty of some sort. The implication is that this type of discourse masquerades as something else, that it is not what it appears to be on the surface, and hence that some kind of duplicity or pretense is involved in it.

Apart from ethical questions, these negative connotations of the use of the word “propaganda” raise some logical questions (logical in the sense of being questions of how to evaluate argumentation used in a text of discourse as rational or spurious, as correctly used or fallacious). What is propaganda as a type of discourse in which arguments are used for some purpose? And should the term “propaganda” be defined in an inherently negative way so that it is always bad or wrong? That is, should all arguments used in propaganda be judged to be fallacious or incorrect (or at least suspect or ill-supported) just because they were used for purposes of propaganda? Or should “propaganda” be defined in a neutral way that does not beg the question or foreclose the question of the worth of the arguments used in it?

Marlin (2002, pp. 18–22) has classified definitions of propaganda into three categories: negative, neutral, and positive. The positive definitions are quite rare. Most of the definitions offered fall into the two first categories of negative and neutral. Eight negative definitions are cited. The first definition says that the goal of propaganda is always to promote the interests of those who contrive it, instead of to benefit to the audience to whom it is addressed. The second definition also adds the characteristic of indifference to the truth, and defines propaganda as the management of opinions and attitudes by the manipulation of social suggestion. The third
definition calls propaganda the attempt to control the behavior of individuals when the ends are considered unscientific or of doubtful value. The fourth definition defines propaganda as a means of gaining power by psychological manipulation of groups or masses. The fifth defines propaganda as any attempt by means of persuasion to enlist people into the service of one party to any dispute. The sixth definition defines propaganda as the systematic effort to manipulate other people’s beliefs and attitudes or actions. The seventh definition focuses on corporate propaganda, referring to communication that has the purpose of bringing a target audience to adopt attitudes and beliefs chosen by the propagandist. The eighth definition defines propaganda as the advocacy of what we do not believe, as opposed to education, defined as the advocacy of what we believe.

Three neutral definitions are cited (pp. 20–21). According to the first, propaganda is dissemination of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, cause, or person. The second defines propaganda as the attempt to influence public opinion through the transmission of ideas and values. The third states that the real aim of propaganda is the spreading of information, whether true or false, good or bad.

Two favorable definitions are cited. The first is a wartime definition describing propaganda as a respectable name for the conveyance of information. The second describes propaganda as part of democratic education to promote active citizenship in a country by giving each individual a living conception of the community.

Of course, offering an abstract definition of a controversial word such as “propaganda” could be seen as using a persuasive definition (see section 3, below, and chapter 8) that makes the definition of propaganda itself a kind of propaganda. Even so, propaganda as a type of discourse does have certain characteristics that enable us to recognize it, or at least to use the word to make claims and criticisms in everyday conversations and in academic arguments. To claim that an argument is propaganda or is part of a discourse that may be described as propagandistic, is a common way of criticizing arguments or of evaluating them in a negative way that suggests that the argument is not based on reliable evidence or rational argumentation. By this means an argument can be attacked, suggesting that it may be rejected as logically unconvincing to a rational person.

But perhaps such common practices are naïve or not based on a form of evaluation that can be rationally justified by appeal to good evidence.
Even worse, perhaps such condemnations are prejudicial and fallacious. For perhaps propaganda is not inherently bad or illogical. Perhaps it has a purpose as an organized and methodical type of discourse that is recognizable as such. And perhaps argumentation in such a type of discourse ought to be evaluated in relation to the goals appropriate for such a use of arguments. The suggestion that propaganda may not be all bad, or not as bad as those who use the term in a negative way so often take for granted, may seem slightly scandalous. But until some clear account of what the term is supposed to mean is given, no way of throwing light on the issue is open.

2. Public Discourse and Reason

When an arguer addresses a mass audience using some form of communicative discourse to try to get the audience to accept a particular view or to support a particular policy, to what extent is such argumentation based on rationality? Many who have a negative view of rhetoric would say that such an appeal to emotions and crowd prejudices should not be described as any kind of rational argumentation. This ambivalence about the role of arguments that appeal to popular opinion will be made evident in chapters 6 and 7. But even without considering the ambivalent view of the logic textbooks on appeal to popular opinion, and the reservations about the role conventional public opinion polling in mass media argumentation, the same kind of ambivalence is expressed by those who have written about political decision making in a democracy.

Political issues should be decided by citizens engaged in public discourse with each other in a democratic and civil exchange of arguments, in the political theory of public decision making. This, at any rate, is the ideal of public discourse advocated by Rawls (1993). Primary components of this process of rational argumentation in public discourse, according to Rawls’s theory (1993, p. 224) are “principles of reasoning and rules of evidence in the light of which citizens are to decide whether substantive principles properly apply,” and rules that determine the kinds of considerations that can legitimately be appealed to in advocating a position or in voting on a policy. But where do such rules and principles come from? The answer given by Rawls is that we are to appeal to “presently accepted general beliefs and forms of reasoning found in common sense, and the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial” (p. 224). Part of this answer is evocative of the form of argument identified as argumentum ad populam in chapter 6. When arguing about laws and policies in public discourse, Rawls tells us, the duty of civility
requires us to stay within the bounds of public reason. For Rawls, then, when a political speaker addresses a mass audience, to try to get them to accept some view she advocates or to support some policy she expounds, the ideals of public discourse require that the speaker should appeal to presently accepted general beliefs and forms of reasoning found in “common sense.” But how should she do this? To get any answer here, we are driven back to reconsider issues related to the *argumentum ad populum* as a form of argument, taken up in chapter 6. Rawls appears to be of the opinion that an argument based on appeal to public discourse is not only a rational kind of argumentation. He seems to combine this assumption with the view that such an argument is useful in mass communication and can be successful in getting a mass audience to accept your view or to follow a policy you advocate.

These assertions are, of course, at odds with the traditional view that the *argumentum ad populum* is a fallacy, as expounded in chapter 6. Many would be highly skeptical about Rawls’s claims and would say that viewing public discourse with a mass audience in his way is hopelessly optimistic. They would say that his view is a distortion of what really takes place in real public discourse, and would be hopelessly impractical as a method of getting a mass audience to do anything. The form of argument called appeal to popular opinion will be shown in chapter 6 to be reasonable under the right conditions. But is it reasonable when used by a mob orator to stir up emotions in a mass audience?

Among the skeptics at the other end of the spectrum from Rawls’s view is that of Le Bon (1896), who argued that crowds think in images and are especially impressed by colorful images and marvelous stories, and that therefore crowds are not influenced by reasoning. Le Bon (p. 81) started from the premise, based on his observations, that crowds do not use logical reasoning to influence their actions and what they accept. From this premise he inferred that it would be a great mistake for a speaker who hopes to influence a crowd to use logical reasoning to try to persuade the crowd to do anything. Le Bon saw the public, or “the crowd,” as he termed the mass audience, as irrational and driven by emotion. He drew the conclusion that what a mass media arguer needs in order to successfully influence the crowd is an appeal to emotion. Whether the appeal to emotion is logical or rational, in his view, matters very little or not at all.

We have shown that crowds do not reason, that they accept or reject ideas as a whole, that they tolerate neither discussion nor contradiction, and that the suggestions brought to bear on them invade the entire field of their understanding.
and tend at once to transform themselves into acts. We have shown that crowds suitably influenced are ready to sacrifice themselves for the ideal with which they have been inspired. We have also seen that they only entertain violent and extreme sentiments, that in their case sympathy quickly becomes adoration, and antipathy almost as soon as it is aroused is transformed into hatred.

According to Le Bon’s account, the nature of the convictions of crowds is more like that of religious faith, or even religious fanaticism, than it is like that of reflective, balanced, logical thinking. Characteristic of the convictions of crowds, according to Le Bon (p. 83) are intolerance, fanaticism, and “whole-souled ardour” in the cause of an individual or in the service of a “victorious leader” who arouses their enthusiasm, and thereby becomes a guide to their actions. There does not seem to be much room for civil public discourse and rational thinking based on common sense, of the kind described by Rawls, in Le Bon’s view of how the convictions of a mass audience can be influenced. The French writer Alexis de Tocqueville was also skeptical about the rationality of appeal to popular opinion as a form of argument in democratic politics. Tocqueville observed that popular opinion in political argumentation fluctuates rapidly in a way that is impossible to predict. He wrote (1966, p. 230): “All of the projects [of the majority] are taken up with great ardor; but as soon as its attention is turned elsewhere, all these efforts cease.” This insight is even more valuable in an age of mass media. The attention span of the public seems to have become shorter and shorter. Something instantly becomes a public issue as all the media sources compete to give central attention to it, like President George W. Bush choking on a pretzel in January 2002. This story was on all the front pages and was the lead story in the news for one day. A few days later nobody was hearing about it. Another example was the disappearance of the Gary Condit story exactly at the time of the 9/11 attack on New York and the Pentagon. The reporting of news to the public goes in a disjointed way from one crisis or spectacular incident to another. This “snapshot” effect was observed by Yankelovich in his remarks on public opinion, discussed below in chapter 4. Reporting of news results in a disjointed sequence of public thinking, leaping from one attention-grabbing story to another. As Yankelovich observed, the public gets information in the form of a snapshot of the event, but there is not enough continuity to represent intelligent deliberation. Thus, Tocqueville’s view of public opinion in mass thinking is almost as skeptical as Le Bon’s.

The views presented by Rawls and Le Bon represent the two extremes on how mass media argumentation influences popular convictions and
attitudes. Rawls’s viewpoint seems to represent a normative model of how public discourse is to be conducted in a democracy, if it is to be just and represent liberal values. Le Bon’s account is more descriptive in nature, based on his own observations of how crowds behave. Le Bon was an astute observer of how convictions are led in a particular direction by the rhetorical arguments of leaders and popular orators. But even if the two views do not irreconcilably conflict, they are strongly opposed in certain ways. Suppose Le Bon is right about how argumentation in popular discourse actually works in influencing mass audiences. Surely, it follows that an account such as that of Rawls, which assumes a fairly high level of rationality in public discourse, is hopelessly impractical, idealistic, and out of touch with how mass conviction works and can be altered. Suppose, on the other hand, that Rawls is right that his model of public reason is a good method for conducting the civil exchange of arguments in a democracy. Then surely it follows that cynics who pander to the worst instincts of crowds by engaging in Le Bon’s methods of dramatic appeal to emotion are engaging in the very sort of irrational demagoguery that most threatens a democracy. The two opposed views represent an interesting problem that can be posed in the form of a dilemma. Can a speaker engage in a rational kind of deliberation or persuasion dialogue with a mass audience, say, in an election campaign or a political speech? And is this kind of rational *argumentum ad populum* necessary for public discourse in a democracy? Or does public discourse influence a mass audience only by appealing to emotions and popular enthusiasm in a way that makes it a deceptive, myth-making, or distorted type of argumentation that is logically suspect or even fallacious?

3. Appeal to the People Revisited

One aspect of propaganda is that, by its very nature, it is designed to reach and influence a mass audience and, as such, is a kind of technique that must appeal successfully to the emotions, commitments, and enthusiasms of the crowd to win acceptance for a conclusion. The fact that propaganda is an “appeal to the people” as a type of argumentation makes it inherently suspicious to logicians. Indeed, it is shown in chapter 6 that the so-called appeal to the people has traditionally been treated by logic textbooks as a fallacious type of argument. Examples from two of the leading introductory textbooks will indicate how this type of argument has generally been treated in logic as a fallacy.
Chapter 6 will concentrate on the *ad populum* argument and its variants. The type of appeal to popular opinion argument in which a premise is “Everyone accepts this proposition” is one variety of the argument, but there is also another one, sometimes called the “mob appeal” type. The distinction between the two types was drawn by Hurley (1994) in his popular logic textbook, *A Concise Introduction to Logic*. According to Hurley (1994, p. 120), the “indirect approach,” or “appeal to the people,” variant of the *argumentum ad populum* has the following basic structure as an argument: You want to be accepted/included in the group/loved/esteemed. Therefore, you should accept XYZ as true.

The indirect approach can be classified as a subtype of the more general *ad populum* argumentation schemes defined in chapter 6, section 4, an indirect type of appeal. By contrast, in the “direct approach” (p. 119), the arguer directs his or her appeal to the individuals in the crowd, as a mass audience. According to Hurley’s account, as quoted below (p. 120), the contrast is that in the direct approach, each person feels united with the crowd, and anyone who fails to go along with the conclusion accepted so enthusiastically by the crowd risks the loss of the security of acceptance by the crowd. Thus the two arguments are connected. But the direct approach is identified with crowd-pleasing rhetoric directed to the mass audience.

The direct approach occurs when an arguer, addressing a large group of people, excites the emotions and enthusiasm of the crowd to win acceptance for his conclusion. The objective is to arouse a kind of mob mentality. This is the strategy used by nearly every propagandist and demagogue. Adolf Hitler was a master of the technique, but it is also used with some measure of success by speechmakers at Democratic and Republican national conventions. Waving flags and blaring music add to the overall effect. Because the individuals in the audience want to share in the camaraderie, the euphoria, and the excitement, they find themselves accepting any number of conclusions with ever-increasing fervor.

The direct approach is not limited to oral argumentation, of course; a similar effect can be accomplished in writing. By employing such emotionally charged phraseology as “fighter of communism,” “champion of the free enterprise system,” and “defender of the working man,” polemicists can awaken the same kind of mob mentality as they would if they were speaking.

Hurley does not consider the possibility that the appeal to the people argument could be reasonable (non-fallacious) in some instances. The appeal to the people is classified by Hurley (p. 116) as a fallacy of
relevance. This categorization means that the appeal to the people is a fallacy because it fails to be relevant as an argument. This analysis allows that the premises of such an argument can be psychologically relevant to the conclusion, making the conclusion seem to follow from the premises. But it denies that they are logically relevant, in the sense that they “provide genuine evidence in support of the conclusion.” Hurley’s citing of Hitler as a propagandist who was a master of the technique of appeal to the people seems to make “appeal to the people” sound particularly despicable. The choice of example seems to be based on the assumption that propaganda is inherently wrong as a form of argumentation, because it is based on the appeal to the people as an underlying argument. The assumption seems to be that propaganda is something that contains, or is based on, the fallacious argument called “appeal to the people.”

Other leading textbooks have reaffirmed this approach. Copi (1982, p. 104) defined argumentum ad populum as the attempt to win popular assent to a conclusion by arousing the emotions and enthusiasms of the multitude, rather than by appeal to the relevant facts. He went on to link this fallacious type of argument with the use of propaganda. This is a favorite device with the propagandist, the demagogue, and the advertiser. Faced with the task of mobilizing public sentiment for or against a particular measure, they will avoid the laborious process of collecting and presenting evidence and rational argument by using the shortcut methods of the argumentum ad populum. Where the proposal is for a change and he is against it, he will express suspicion of “newfangled innovations” and praise the wisdom of the “existing order.” If he is for it, he will be for “progress” and opposed to “antiquated prejudice.” Here we have the use of invidious terms with no rational attempt made to argue for them or to justify their application. This technique may be supplemented by displaying the flag, brass bands, and whatever else might serve to stimulate and excite the public. (p. 104)

Copi went on to criticize the “twentieth-century advertiser” in particular, as a “huckster” and “ballyhoo artist” who has elevated the argumentum ad populum “almost to the status of a fine art” in designing commercials that sell “day-dreams and delusions of grandeur” (pp. 104–105), as will be noted in chapter 6. Copi, like Hurley, classified such ad populum arguments as fallacious on the grounds that they commit fallacies of relevance (p. 98). Like Hurley, Copi (p. 99) saw the failure as one of a failure of logical relevance, masked by a psychological relevance that makes such an argument seem persuasive and correct.

Now the basic assumption that propaganda uses, or is even based on, the argumentum ad populum because it does address a mass audience
Propaganda does seem to be true. Propaganda does try to persuade a mass audience to accept a conclusion based on premises that are popularly or widely accepted, and it does typically work by exciting the emotions and enthusiasms of the crowds. If propaganda is based on this fallacious kind of irrelevant argumentation, surely that explains both why propaganda is negatively evaluated from a logical point of view and why it contravenes rational standards of argument. But there are grounds for doubt about this explanation. According to the analysis in chapter 6, below, at least some kinds of ad populum arguments are not inherently fallacious and can sometimes be reasonable. To clarify the question, it is necessary to reconsider the grounds on which the logic textbooks condemn ad populum arguments as fallacious.

One of these is that ad populum arguments appeal to emotions, specifically the emotions and enthusiasms of the crowd. But is the use of emotional appeal in itself sufficient grounds for judging an argument to be fallacious? I have argued previously (1994) that use of emotional appeal does not necessarily mean, by itself, that an argument is fallacious. In the following chapters, we will see that appeals to emotion can often provide good grounds for presumptively accepting a conclusion on a default basis. This means that in the absence of the hard information needed to conclusively resolve the issue, the argument can function in a dialogue such as a deliberation as a way of steering conduct toward a prudent line of action based on practical reasoning.

Another reason ad populum arguments are often classified as fallacious is that they pander to the crowd by drawing on premises that are popularly accepted. As Copi (1982, p. 105) warned, "popular acceptance of a policy does not prove it to be wise [and] general assent to a claim does not prove it to be true." According to this account, ad populum arguments are based on premises that are commitments of the mass audience, and therefore they are not rational arguments based on evidence that is factual and has been verified. But is this factor, by itself, a sufficient reason for judging all ad populum arguments to be fallacious? The answer is no, according to the analysis presented below in chapter 6, because endoxic arguments, arguments based on popular opinions or that have premises that express widely held assumptions, are not necessarily and in themselves fallacious. Also, arguments addressed to a specific audience, and based on the commitments of that specific audience as premises, are not necessarily fallacious either. It depends on how those premises are used in an argument in a specific case, whether the premises are subject to doubt and critical questioning in the discussion, and which other kinds
of arguments and evidential considerations are used alongside these *ad populum* arguments. Once again, as long as the *ad populum* arguments are not taken as conclusive or as the only basis for arriving at a conclusion, they can have a legitimate role in shifting a weight of presumption to one side or the other in a rational discussion.

The main ground Hurley and Copi bring to bear in classifying *ad populum* arguments as fallacious is that of relevance. On both their accounts, *ad populum* arguments are said to be fallacious because the premises of an appeal to a mass audience or a crowd are psychologically relevant to its acceptance of a conclusion but are not logically relevant. To be logically relevant, they must provide good evidence to support the conclusion.

But are premises based on popular opinions, or on the enthusiastic convictions of a crowd, always logically irrelevant to a conclusion? It would seem not. As will be shown in chapter 7, in public opinion polls of the kind commonly used to predict election results, poll-based appeals to popular opinion can be reasonable when they have the following form. The premise is the statement that the majority, or such-and-such percent of respondents polled, accept proposition *A* (such as believing that someone is the better candidate for office). The conclusion that proposition *A* is true is rationally justified as a reasonable presumption with a certain weight of likelihood – for example, the proposition that so-and-so will win the election. In many cases, polling is quite a good way to judge public opinion or to help set social policy. The use of the poll to draw an inference, as shown below in chapter 7, is not an inherently fallacious form of argumentation. In fact, in many arguments commonly used in everyday conversational exchanges and deliberations, the fact that a proposition is widely accepted is rightly taken as a reasonable (but not conclusive or irrefutable) and relevant premise for provisionally accepting that proposition as plausible. As has been emphasized so often above, such an argument needs to be evaluated in a dialogue framework. It needs to be seen as subject to further questioning, before hasty inferences are drawn from it to other propositions.

Much depends here on what is meant by “logically relevant.” A proposition based on crowd appeal or popular acceptance would not be logically relevant in a scientific discussion, say, in physics or chemistry. But it could be logically relevant in an argument used in a court of law or in a business meeting about advertising strategy in marketing a product, as shown below in chapter 4. Dialectical relevance depends on the purpose of the discourse the argument in question is being used to contribute to. If the purpose of a speech is to mobilize the country for war or to persuade an
audience to support a cause like protecting the environment, appealing to the commitments of the audience or even to its enthusiasm may be relevant. It may be necessary and appropriate in order to convince them that a particular course of conduct would be wise and should be accepted as a policy. In the right setting, an appeal to mass enthusiasm to get support and commitment for a proposed policy or course of action can be suitable rhetoric.

Our tentative conclusion (which will require more support) is that propaganda is based on an appeal to the people type of argument, especially the so-called direct type. The problem is with the leap from that premise to the conclusion that propaganda must be wrong or fallacious for that reason alone. The urge to take this leap seems to stem from what has become the routine assumption that rhetoric directed to a mass audience is inherently illogical, deceptive, or full of trickery. This pervasive assumption seems hard to combat. As shown in chapter 1, the negative attitude toward rhetoric has itself become a popular opinion. But once that assumption is seriously questioned, the need to look at propaganda in a different normative light becomes apparent. The characteristic that propaganda is a form of mass media argumentation should not, in itself, be regarded as sufficient for drawing the conclusion that all propaganda is irrational or illogical or that any argument used in propaganda is for that reason alone fallacious.

4. The Dialectical Viewpoint on Propaganda

Propaganda is itself such a negative term that any attempt to redefine it runs the risk of being labeled as a persuasive definition of the most questionable sort. In public opinion, propaganda is just something bad, and it is very hard to argue against a firmly entrenched public opinion in a philosophical or intellectual discussion. But having introduced dialectic as a normative framework for argument analysis and evaluation in chapter 1, can we apply it now to a discussion of propaganda? Can we play devil’s advocate, and argue that when used in an appropriate dialectical setting, argumentation that could be classified propaganda could be reasonable? It all depends, of course on what one means by “reasonable.” Rationality, as argued in chapter 1, must always be judged according to some standards. Traditionally in logic, arguments have been evaluated as valid or invalid according to semantic standards. But recently, pragmatic or dialectical standards of the kind outlined in chapter 2 have been developed to also evaluate how arguments are used in different types of
The Dialectical Viewpoint on Propaganda

conversational contexts. In such a dialectical framework, each type of dialogue has its goal, and an argument is successful (or used correctly) to the extent that it contributes to the chosen conversational goals. This pragmatic framework has also been used to investigate informal (and formal) fallacies in Walton (1995), where an argument is judged to be used incorrectly or inadequately if it fails to contribute to a given conversational goal. Within such a framework an argument is said to be used in a fallacious way, in a given context of conversation, if it hinders or even blocks the fulfillment of the goal of the conversation (often by the use of deception, by seeming to be used correctly). So how does propaganda fit in? Evidently, it is a type of persuasion, to get action, judging from the characterizations considered so far. But also, as made evident in the discussions of Rawls, it has to do with public deliberation in a democracy. Thus deliberation would seem to be part of it. As Le Bon showed, it also has to do with mass appeal crowd rhetoric, suggesting perhaps an eristic aspect. Somehow, the kind of mass appeal argumentation characteristic of propaganda combines these dialectical elements.

In chapter 2 the six types of conversational frameworks—called types of dialogue—were identified. They are especially basic to evaluating argumentation of the kind typically used in everyday conversational arguments. To review, these are eristic dialogue, persuasion dialogue, deliberation, inquiry, information-seeking dialogue, and negotiation. Each goal-directed type of dialogue provides a conversational framework in which a given argument can be normatively evaluated as used correctly or incorrectly to contribute to the goal of a type of dialogue the participants are presumably engaged in. Of course, each argument in a given case needs to be evaluated in light of the text of discourse from which the argument can be reconstructed and identified. Eristic dialogue—the quarrel being the leading subtype—is the type of verbal exchange where each party has a grievance and “hits out” at the other party to try to humiliate him or her. The quarrel is often an angry, emotional exchange, and as the saying goes, it generates more heat than light, and is not much of a friend to logic. This observation is evocative of some of Le Bon’s observations on propaganda as an emotional appeal to the mass audience, mobilizing the crowd to “hit out” aggressively. In persuasion dialogue, each participant has the goal of getting the other party to become committed to a particular proposition, based on arguments using only premises the other party is already committed to. The key concept is that of an arguer’s commitment. The problem with the direct or mob appeal type of ad populum is how the mass speaker can appeal to the audience as a whole group
or argument community, rather than just targeting single individuals as respondents. In the inquiry, the goal is to prove a particular proposition (or disprove it, or prove it cannot be proved, or prove it cannot be disproved) based on premises that are verified (known to be true). The inquiry uses cumulative argumentation of a kind that is so well established that no propositions in the chain of reasoning ever need to be retracted. At least that is the goal (ideally) of the inquiry type of dialogue. Thus, the inquiry seems to have little to do with appeal to popular opinion, for, as Tocqueville pointed out, mass public opinion is inherently unstable.

In information-seeking dialogue, one party tries to get some information that the other party possesses but that the first party lacks. This type of dialogue is relevant to propaganda that is so often presented in a news format. In the negotiation type of dialogue, the goal is to “make a deal” – to come to a division of some goods, services, or interests that are in short supply. Each party tries to get a share of the goods that represent what is most important to her, while leaving the other party enough of a share of what is important to him so that he does not feel cheated. Negotiation dialogue is not about searching for the truth of a matter or about rationally convincing the other party that a particular proposition is true or false. It is simply interest-based bargaining. This type of dialogue also seems relevant to propaganda, which often seems to be based on advancing interests and not on getting to the truth of a matter.

5. Persuasion and Propaganda

The ultimate goal of propaganda is to get the respondents to take a particular course of action. Many definitions of “propaganda” postulate that the goal of propaganda is to change the respondents’ beliefs or to persuade the respondents to accept some proposition as true (or false). But these goals, although they are typically part of propaganda, are secondary to the ultimate goal, which is always (as a matter of practical politics) to get the respondents to do (or abstain from doing) something. These secondary goals are always means to the ultimate end of propaganda, which is action or compliance with action.

Thus propaganda involves rhetoric. For as indicated in chapter 2, the purpose of rhetoric is persuasion (Wenzel 1990, p. 81). But how is propaganda related to dialectic? Is the speech act of persuasion a kind of argument move used in propaganda? And could propaganda be seen, or judged normatively, from a viewpoint of persuasion dialogue? In persuasion dialogue, the proponent’s goal is to use the commitments of
Persuasion and Propaganda

the respondent as premises in order to persuade the respondent to also become committed to some particular proposition he previously had doubts about accepting. This process of persuading a respondent to accept some particular proposition as true is tied in with how propaganda is used. And therefore, many conclude that from a dialectical point of view, propaganda can be defined essentially as a type of persuasion dialogue. But it certainly is a peculiar type of persuasion dialogue. Many would say it is a degenerate or false (pseudo) persuasion dialogue used to try to influence a mass audience.

But the aim of propaganda is not just to secure a respondent’s assent to a proposition by persuading him that it is true or that it is supported by propositions he is already committed to. The aim of propaganda is to get the respondent to act, to adopt a certain course of action, or to go along with and assist in a particular policy. Merely securing assent or commitment to a proposition is not enough to make propaganda successful in securing its aim. Whether or not an audience really believes a particular viewpoint or accepts it as true, the aim of propaganda is to get them to go along with a policy or program in a more practical sense, by taking part in it and by allowing it to be implemented as a plan of social action.

This way of defining propaganda has important implications for the issue of whether propaganda is inherently bad, deceptive, or against truth. For if you see propaganda as a type of persuasion dialogue, then once you note its indifference to the truth, you then can pinpoint its bad aspect as being a defective kind of persuasion dialogue. For participants in persuasion dialogue are supposed to have a regard for the truth of a matter. This is particularly crucial in a critical discussion, where participants are not supposed to ignore matters relevant to the issue of the discussion. This is certainly true in the critical discussion type of persuasion dialogue described by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1987, 1992). Hence propaganda, once seen as a species of persuasion dialogue, is easily seen as inherently defective, because it ignores or even suppresses relevant evidence on the issue being argued when such an ignoring is convenient to its purpose. But if you don’t see propaganda as a type of persuasion dialogue, it may be less easy to convict it as being inherently negative or critically defective in nature. Thus, from a dialectical point of view, it is useful to at least initially view propaganda as persuasion dialogue of a sort.

If the goal of propaganda is to get the respondent to act in a certain way, then ignoring evidence on whether certain propositions are true or are
relevant to accepting them as true is not necessarily a deviation from or a subverting of the goal of the dialogue. Defining propaganda as a kind of action-getting dialogue, as opposed to a persuasion type of dialogue, it is harder to condemn propaganda as being inherently negative in nature. Its indifference to the truth may no longer necessarily be a failure or critical defect of propaganda that makes it inherently bad or deceptive. It could be that propaganda is indifferent to truth because finding the truth of a matter is simply not its purpose. It shouldn’t be ethically condemned for failing to pay attention to some aim that is not central to its purpose as a type of discourse.

On the other hand, it is clear that persuasion is typically an important part of propaganda and that much of its method involves persuasion. And it does seem that, descriptively speaking, one of the main means used in propaganda to get an audience to act in a certain way is to use persuasive argumentation targeted to their commitments. The goal is to get them to accept or to adopt a favorable attitude to certain propositions they may have doubts about. Propaganda is in this respect comparable to the discourse of commercial ads, such as those used on television. The purpose of the ad seems mainly to get the viewers to buy more products. Try talking to representatives of the advertising firms that make these ads, and suggest to them that the ads should use rational persuasion to convince the viewers that the product is good or better than those of the competition. They will dismiss this account of the purpose of commercial advertisements as both naïve and too narrow. Sometimes the ads are evidently designed to rationally convince the potential buyer that the product has certain good or useful features or is a good buy. But more often the strategy of the ad is simply to draw attention to the brand or to generate a favorable ambience associated with the brand, by using visual images to arouse emotions.

Similarly, the goal of propaganda is basically to get compliance for action, or action itself, and surely its success or failure ought to be judged by this criterion. Persuasion by logical reasoning designed to rationally convince the audience is not necessarily involved – although it could be used in some cases – even though persuasion of a sort is involved as part of the modus operandi.

Propaganda then is a mixed type of dialogue that does not fit any of the six normative models of dialogue in chapter 2 exactly. It seems to be a distinctively different type of discourse altogether, even though it can directly involve elements of at least five of the six types of dialogue noted. Propaganda is best seen as a type of goal-directed discourse in
Characteristics of Propaganda

its own right that has ten essential, identifying characteristics. As such, it can function in its own right as a normative structure in which arguments can be evaluated as used correctly or incorrectly (provided the other normative models of dialogue are also used) in a given case. Like deliberation dialogue, it is directed toward recommending a course of action; like persuasion dialogue, it works by calling on the commitments of the audience to gain its acceptance for a standpoint; and like eristic dialogue, it is aggressively partisan and emotional.

6. Characteristics of Propaganda

Below, ten essential characteristics of propaganda as a mode of discourse are set out, followed by a discussion of some other incidental characteristics.

1. Dialogue Structure. Propaganda has the form of a dialogue (communicative discourse) between two participants. The one party, who can also be a group, or a person representing a group, is called the proponent and is the speaker or sender of the message. The other party, called the respondent, and who is generally a mass audience of people, is the receiver of the message. Typically, the proponent is the active participant, while the respondent is a passive receiver of the message sent out by the proponent. But this asymmetrical relationship is not characteristic of all cases of propaganda. In some instances, the respondent group does engage in a bilateral dialogue exchange by responding positively or negatively to the proponent’s message, or even by questioning or criticizing it – information that the proponent can use as feedback to craft her message more persuasively. Also, propaganda has a dialogue structure in that the argumentation of the proponent is based on what she takes to be the commitments of the respondent. The goal of the argumentation is to alter the convictions or actions of the proponent in a particular direction or toward a particular view different from the one the respondent already has.

2. Message Content. The content of the proponent’s message is an argument, expressed in a verbal discourse and/or in other means of altering convictions that are not verbal in nature. The message can be purely verbal, as in a speech, but it can also be pictorial. Or it could be a mixture of these, as in the case of a news reporter commenting on videotaped clips. Propaganda frequently involves props, such as drums and flags, and it may also use music or drama or be conveyed in a dramatic format, such as a film or a novel. In some cases, propaganda can
be conveyed by objects such as coins or statues or even by costumes and settings that express the values of a particular life-style or social class.

3. Goal-Directed Structure. Propaganda is essentially goal-directed as a type of dialogue exchange. The proponent’s goal is to get the respondent to carry out a particular action or to support a particular policy for action. This purposive aspect of propaganda is so marked that it is frequently described as “manipulative” in nature. As well as there being a goal for the proponent, against which the success or failure of the proponent’s argumentation can be evaluated, there is also a general goal for propaganda as an institutionally recognizable type of dialogue. The general purpose is to support the existence, aims, and interests of a particular regime, organization, viewpoint, or interest group. Frequently, the purpose of propaganda is to support the interests of a country or a political party, government, or regime that directs the affairs of the country. But other groups or individuals, such as religious groups, political action groups, or advertisers, can also engage in propaganda.

4. Involvement of Social Groups. Propaganda is not just any argumentation meant to persuade or to get action. The respondent is a mass audience. And while the message may be delivered by an individual speaker, she always represents some broader agency or organized group that has interests or views that binds its members together.

5. Indifference to Logical Reasoning. The goal of propaganda is to move a mass audience in a certain direction, and its success or failure as argumentation used in a context of discourse should be judged in relation to how well (or badly) it performs in fulfilling this purpose. If methods of logical reasoning are useful for this purpose, then they should be used in propaganda. Thus propaganda is not, as a structure of discourse, either for or against using logical reasoning and relevant evidence. If appeals to emotion, of a kind that would be judged dubious or even fallacious by logical standards of good reasoning, work better than rational evidence to achieve the goal of argumentation used in propaganda, then such appeals are appropriate and should (normatively speaking) be used by good propagandists.

6. One-Sided Argumentation. Propaganda is a kind of advocacy dialogue that uses partisan argumentation to advocate one side of an issue and to present the arguments in favor of that side as strongly as possible. Propaganda is not an attempt to rationally deliberate on the wisdom or prudence of a course of action by looking at all the alternatives and weighing them judiciously or fairly. Neither is it an attempt to critically discuss an issue by openly considering all the arguments on both sides. Instead,
Characteristics of Propaganda

it is inherently one-sided as a type of discourse in which argumentation is used.

7. Involvement of Persuasion Dialogue. The primary goal of propaganda is to get an audience to support the aims, interests, and policies of a particular group, by securing the compliance of the audience with the actions being contemplated, undertaken, or advocated by the group. The goal of the propagandist then is not just to persuade or “re-educate” the audience to change their beliefs. It is also to gain their commitment to the extent that they will act on the basis of the new viewpoint they have come to accept or to take part in or support actions in line with or justified by this viewpoint. So persuasion is involved, but the speaker’s goal in propaganda is more than just to change the beliefs of the audience. The proponent’s fundamental goal in propaganda is to move the masses to action (to go to war, to buy a product, etc.), to comply with action, or to accept and not oppose a certain line of action. But persuasion is involved in a secondary but essential way, because the means used to get action, or support for action, is that of persuading the audience to become committed to a particular point of view that the audience did not accept (or did not fully embrace) before.

8. Justified by Results. Because its central purpose is to get action, propaganda as a socially organized activity is justified by the results it is supposed to achieve (both normatively and, in fact, by its defenders, in particular instances). In fact, propaganda is justified by the supposed value of bringing about a particular outcome said to be necessary for a good end, such as public safety or the saving of human lives in war. Propaganda is generally justified by citing a danger to the group, and then stressing that the adoption of a particular point of view is needed to combat or guard against that danger. Such a justification balances the costs of engaging in one-sided or even deceptive argumentation against the danger or loss of life that might result from an open-minded rational discussion that might turn up good arguments for the other side. The justification of propaganda is, in this respect, similar to the justification of lying in ethics, illustrated by case 3.6 below. Propaganda tends to be justified, as a matter of fact, in terms of its consequences, by those who try to justify or excuse its use. But also, from a normative point of view, propaganda ought to be justified by such a use of argumentation from consequences, for its goal is to lead to action.

9. Emotive Language and Persuasive Definitions. An essential part of all propaganda is the use of emotively charged words and phrases that make the advocated viewpoint take on a highly positive coloration, and any opposed viewpoint take on a highly negative coloration. For example,
supporters of an advocated view may be called freedom fighters, while supporters of the opposed viewpoint are designated as terrorists. A whole new vocabulary may be invented, and all kinds of pejorative words and phrases may be used to denote the opposed viewpoint. Another characteristic of propaganda is the use of persuasive definitions, as defined by the theory of emotive meaning of Stevenson (1944). This theory will be outlined, developed, and extended to mass media argumentation in chapter 8. Now it can be seen as applicable to propaganda as a type of argumentation. According to Stevenson’s theory, the purpose of a persuasive definition is to engender a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward something by changing the descriptive meaning of the word for that thing while leaving the evaluative meaning the same. How persuasive definitions are so characteristic of propaganda can be already appreciated by reviewing some illustrative examples given in a popular logic textbook. Hurley (1994, p. 92) offered the following two examples.

**Case 3.1**

“Abortion” means the ruthless murdering of innocent human beings.

“Abortion” means a safe and established surgical procedure whereby a woman is relieved of an unwanted burden.

**Case 3.2**

“Liberal” means a drippy-eyed do-gooder obsessed with giving away other people’s money.

“Liberal” means a genuine humanitarian committed to the goals of adequate housing and health care and of equal opportunity for all of our citizens.

Persuasive definitions tend to be deceptive as used in argumentation (and objects of suspicion, from a logical point of view) because, as Hurley (p. 92) pointed out, they conceal the approving or condemning of something by masquerading as an honest assignment of meaning to a word. Thus there is a very close resemblance between the deceptive technique of propaganda and the deceptive kind of tactic used in putting forward a persuasive definition in argumentation.

10. Eristic Aspect. Propaganda has a structure of argumentation like that of the quarrel, or eristic type of dialogue. It postulates a dichotomy for the audience: “We are the good guys. If you are not for us, you must be against us. All those opposed to our view are the bad guys.” Often the words “fight” or “struggle” are used in propaganda. The implication is that any means required to fight against the “evil” or danger posed by the “enemy” is justified. Propaganda is most visible and has been most studied...
Characteristics of Propaganda

as used in war. In time of war, the participants become caught up in an emotional attitude of hate and bitterness that is not conducive to what Thouless (1942) calls “calm thinking” of the kind that dispassionately weighs the evidence on both sides of an issue. Even when used outside war, propaganda often paints the picture of an emergency or danger of a kind that provokes fear and panic. The circumstances are portrayed as like that of a war, where a “fight” is needed to combat the danger facing the group.

Another characteristic of propaganda (Marlin 1989, p. 46) is the phenomenon of orchestration, meaning that it manipulates different media over time to produce a cumulative message. Other characteristics associated with propaganda cited by Marlin are misuse of statistics, manipulation of opinion polls, photomontage techniques, and the use of psychological techniques of persuasion. Misuse of opinion polls by advocacy groups will be studied in chapter 7. Propaganda is known to use psychologically effective techniques, such as visual imagery, repetition, massed crowds, and symbols of group identification, to create a climate of acceptance for its message. Propaganda is also known to often use suggestion in place of or to supplement explicitly verbalized arguments for a conclusion (Thouless 1942, p. 65). Thus, suggestion and implicature are vitally important modes of argumentation in propaganda.

These additional characteristics are not essential to propaganda, but only typical of it, whereas the first ten characteristics listed above are all essential for a text of discourse in a given case to qualify as propaganda. This definition is not meant to be purely stipulative in nature but is meant to represent, within the limits of any abstract philosophical theory, the conventionally accepted view of propaganda as a familiar kind of discourse. You could say it is a persuasive definition of “propaganda” as a type of discourse, partly characterized itself by using persuasive definition. But I believe that the circularity or reflexivity of the definition can be defended and rationally justified. Because it has been argued here that persuasive definitions are not inherently fallacious, it is also possible to argue for the claim that a persuasive definition of “propaganda” is possible and legitimate. What is the purpose of offering a definition of “propaganda”? Primarily, it is meant to be part of a normative model of a type of argumentation familiar in a kind of conversational discourse known to us in examples of mass media argumentation. The definition is primarily dialectical, in that it relates to norms of conversation. The normative model is meant to be used in a helpful way to identify, analyze, and evaluate argumentation used in particular cases in a given text of discourse.
7. Is Propaganda Necessarily Dishonest or Irrational?

One approach has been to capture the negative connotations of the word “propaganda” by defining it as a type of discourse that expressly has the purpose of going against or circumventing critical thinking of the kind used in a rational discussion of an issue, based on good evidence and information. This type of definition makes propaganda inherently negative, illogical and/or deceptive in nature, on the grounds that it is opposed to rational discussion and logical evaluation of arguments. The definition given by Marlin (1989, p. 50) is of this kind.

(propaganda) = (def.) 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 judgment.

This definition is very helpful in capturing several important features of propaganda, but in light of the approach proposed here, it goes questionably far in defining propaganda as inherently negative on grounds of its being opposed to informed, rational argument and discussion. According to Marlin’s definition, the purpose of propaganda includes the circumvention or suppression of informed, rational, and reflective judgment. But there are grounds for questioning such a negative way of defining “propaganda.”

Thouless (1942, p. 71) has discussed the issue of whether the word “propaganda” should be defined in a negative way that makes it contrary to the aims of logical thinking. He argued that if “propaganda” means any attempt to influence attitudes or opinions of a group, it does not follow that propaganda is necessarily dishonest or irrational. To support this point, he cited a case where a true statement is made as a propaganda claim.

Case 3.3

Men’s opinions may be changed by telling them a perfectly true fact that was previously unknown to them. Thus a statement that British fighting aeroplanes have shot down thirteen German bombers with a loss of seven to themselves may serve the ends of propaganda by creating confidence on our side and alarm and despondency in the enemy (if he hears it). Yet it may be perfectly true. This is one honest and reasonable way in which propaganda may influence opinion; by giving new and true information. (p. 71)

In this kind of case, propaganda presents a statement that is both true and informative to the audience. In such a case, the propaganda is not dishonest, deceptive, or against the aims of rational discussion, because
informing the audience of a true statement has propaganda value. Case 3.5 provides a counter-example to the thesis that propaganda should be defined as inherently negative, in the sense of always being against informed, rational judgment or always consisting of lies or deceptions.

However, there is another sense in which propaganda does seem to be against informed, rational, and reflective thinking of the kind characteristic of a critical discussion that takes into account all the relevant information on an issue. Propaganda selects out the facts it presents to an audience, and although it may present some true statements, it may ignore other true and relevant statements that lack propaganda value, even though they are relevant, in a logical sense.

As Thouless put it, “The difficulty is that not all truth has propaganda value.” He uses the following case to illustrate the point.

Case 3.4
Let us suppose that there were two air battles in one of which the enemy losses were heavy and our own were light, while in the other battle our own losses were heavy and the enemy’s were light. If our own news service chose to tell us only about the first battle while the enemy news service only reported the second, there would be a certain (not very important) sense in which both sides were telling the truth. Neither side would be telling the whole truth, and it would no longer be honest propaganda. This is a very simple example of what is meant by “selection” of the facts, perhaps the commonest of all the devices used by propaganda which is intended to mislead. (p. 71)

In this case, reporting the outcome of the one battle has propaganda value to one side but not to the other. Whereas reporting the outcome of the other battle has value only to the other side. Thus both sides are telling the truth in their propaganda reports. The fault lies in the selectivity – both sides are giving a biased account.

In case 3.4, what makes the propaganda at odds with a balanced critical discussion, or a presenting of information that tells the whole truth, is the selectivity type of bias evident in the discourse. It is not that the propaganda lied or was deceptive in reporting what was not true. The problem, from a point of view of informed and rational thinking, was that the propaganda showed evidence of a bias, by ignoring those facts that had no propaganda value or would even have had propaganda disvalue. And this aspect does seem to imply that propaganda is against the aims of a rational discussion based on an informed assessment of the facts. The conclusion implied is that propaganda is necessarily irrational or
Propaganda dishonest in the sense of being opposed to the critical and informed rational discussion of an issue.

But now the question is raised whether all bias is necessarily bad bias, in the sense of being bias that is dishonest or contrary to the aims of logic and reasoned discussion and argumentation: Blair (1977) argued that not all bias is of the kind that could be called “bad bias” and that in many cases, bias is normal partisanship or advocacy, of the kind that is expected in a certain type of case. I have previously defined dialectical bias in argumentation as one-sidedness of an argument (1999b). Such one-sidedness, exemplified in arguing to support one’s own point of view in a critical discussion, is normally expected in that type of dialogue. Advocacy is required for the dialogue to be successful, and is not a sound basis (by itself) for condemning the given argument, used in a particular case in that context, as logically defective or fallacious. Where bias does become what could be called bad bias, from a logical point of view, it occurs in the kind of case where the argumentation is supposed to be balanced, in the sense of considering the evidence on both sides of an issue, but where the argumentation is only one-sided. It is in just this kind of case that fallacies of relevance tend to occur, that is, cases in which an argument is supposed to be part of a balanced type of dialogue, such as a critical discussion, but is really being advanced in eristic fashion. In such a case, the problem is that the argumentation is not supposed to be exclusively one-sided. Such an argument can be said to be appropriate and useful as part of a quarrel. From that point of view, it could be productive in getting both sides to express buried grievances. But it is not a productive way of taking part in a critical discussion, where openness to both sides is essential. From a point of view of persuasion dialogue it could be counterproductive.

It is in just this kind of case where a dialectical shift has occurred of the kind that makes an argument appear (psychologically) to be relevant when it (logically) is not. And this explanation of fallacies of relevance pinpoints exactly the problem of evaluating arguments used in propaganda. If a discourse is supposed to be propaganda, and if the audience is aware that the discourse is of this type, then no deception or irrelevance need be involved. This can hold true even if the speaker uses arguments that appeal to the commitments and enthusiasms of the people by using emotional language slanted to one side of a cause, or even persuasive definitions that involve emotive connotations of words and phrases. However, if such a discourse purports to be a critical discussion, a rational deliberation on the issue, or some other type of
dialogue requiring standards of argumentation, the evaluation could be quite different. If the argumentation uses emotional mass appeals that are inappropriate or non-contributing to the goals of that type of dialogue, then it could be correctly judged to be irrelevant. It may be psychologically relevant but dialectically irrelevant to the goals of the dialogue that the participants are supposed to be engaged in. It could reasonably be judged to be fallacious on that basis, from a dialectical point of view.

It follows then that propaganda is not in itself irrational or deceptive, in the sense that arguments in it should always be judged as critically defective, not based on good evidence, fallacious, or whatever. The key to the dialectical evaluation of propaganda is in the deception and in the dialectical shift. It is the mismatch between appearances conveyed to the mass audience by the proponent and the reality of the proponent’s argumentation. The basic fault is one of irrelevance in argumentation. Propaganda is a type of discourse in which arguments can be justifiably dismissed as logically defective on grounds of irrelevance where there has been an illicit dialectical shift from some other type of dialogue that is supposed to represent a balanced account of two sides of an issue. The shift is to a purely one-sided attempt to engage in a kind of mass appeal to emotion to push in a one-sided way to gain the commitment of an audience to accepting a particular conclusion. Typically, this is an eristic type of dialogue in which the proponent has adopted the strategy of engaging in a “fight” to get action. It also often involves the reality of a negotiation type of dialogue in which the proponent is engaged in interest-based bargaining. The underlying reality is that the proponent is only putting on a superficial display of considering the arguments on both sides of the issue.

According to our proposed analysis and definition of propaganda so far, then, there are not sufficient grounds for concluding that propaganda is inherently irrational or deceptive as a type of discourse. But one key factor remains to be carefully considered.

8. Openness to Contrary Evidence

The eristic and one-sided characteristics of the argumentation used in propaganda raise further questions about the closed nature of propaganda as a type of discourse. As noted in describing the eristic characteristic of propaganda, a dichotomization typically occurs, and the words “fight” and “struggle” are often used. One of the properties of the quarrel
as a type of dialogue is that the one side being advocated is never really open to defeat. Any argument that presents good evidence for the other side will be deflected by any means possible, instead of admitting that it makes a good point. Propaganda also has a biased manner of treating the evidence, indicating a lack of openness to arguments on both sides of an issue. Thus the question is raised whether propaganda is essentially a closed type of discourse that never judges an argument on the basis of the evidence that is brought forward to support it.

To begin with, it is evident from instances of propaganda that it does have a way of interpreting a situation that conforms to the viewpoint being advocated. A good case in point was found by Thouless (1942, pp. 72-73) in an article, “Germany and the Law at Sea,” in the Sunday Times of December 24, 1939.

Case 3.5
The writer described how a British fishing trawler was sunk by a German submarine; the boats were stated to have been shelled while they were being lowered, the submarine afterwards going away. Here we have a typical atrocity story. If the shelling of the boats was deliberate and not accidental and if the submarine went away intending to leave those who were in the water to drown, this can properly be condemned as wicked and cruel behavior. The article also reported, however, that the submarine came back, picked up survivors out of the water, took off their wet clothing, and gave them hot drinks and blankets. That surely would seem to an impartial observer to be a good and kind action. It might, in fact, arouse some doubt as to whether the earlier atrocity story was not perhaps based on inaccurate observation.

The matter is not, however, so simple to the propagandist. The writer of the article says: “This sort of thing makes it clear that the German submarine commanders, while acting with true German ruthlessness, are also acting in accordance with a carefully prepared plan designed to impress upon the world that Germany is, in fact, employing chivalrous and humane methods despite the well-established and widely known facts to the direct contrary.” So it appears that if the Germans are ruthless to their enemies, they are showing their ruthlessness; if they are kind to their enemies they are carrying out a plan to conceal their ruthlessness.

Thouless described the argumentation in this case as similar to that used by the handwriting expert in the Dreyfus trial, where Alfred Dreyfus was accused of giving military secrets to his country’s enemies. When the handwriting on the document in evidence resembled that of Dreyfus, this was taken as proof that he wrote the document. But when other aspects of the handwriting on the document differed from that of Dreyfus, the differences were taken to prove that he had disguised his handwriting. So it was a case of “Heads I win, tails you lose.” This kind of argument
represents a persistent twisting of the evidence so that it always comes out only one way.

Case 3.5 shows how propaganda has a tendency to interpret a situation in such a way that the evidence presented always supports the advocated viewpoint and goes against the opposed viewpoint. What seems like it should be exactly the right sort of empirical evidence to support the other side is somehow cleverly interpreted in a way that it comes out looking like positive evidence supporting the advocated view instead. This twisting of evidence phenomenon in cases of propaganda raises questions about the verifiability and falsifiability of arguments used in propaganda generally. It suggests that argumentation used in propaganda is never really open to refutation, even by clearly opposed evidence. What one may conclude is that propaganda is an inherently closed type of dialogue, like eristic dialogue, that never really admits defeat, even when good evidence supporting the opposed view has been presented. What reinforces this conclusion are certain aspects of examples of propaganda that are often cited, such as Nazi propaganda, communist propaganda, or any political kind of argumentation meant to promote a cause in which the world is divided into converted believers and enemies. Another type of discourse that fits the description in some cases could be called religious preaching rhetoric of a kind designed for conversion of unbelievers and reaffirming the beliefs of the faithful. In this kind of rhetoric, there is no middle ground. The arguments are one-sided, and the dialogue may appear open, but there is no possibility that the proponent will ever admit defeat. A good argument for the other side will always be repelled or discounted, and that outcome is determined in advance. These cases represent a kind of argumentation that could in some cases be called fanatical. They are fanatical in the sense that the argumentation represents the proponent’s ideological view of things that is not really open to refutation by means of rational arguments citing factual or verifiable evidence. These fanatical kinds of discourse always twist the evidence to support the one side exclusively, exhibiting a closed kind of attitude that I have called hardened bias. The bias is not only a one-sided argumentation but a pattern of argument that is relentlessly one-sided in a predictable way.

But is propaganda inevitably one-sided, exhibiting this pattern of hardened bias as a type of discourse? It seems that it is not. For often propaganda is most effective when it pretends to be balanced, to admit contrary evidence, and to present true statements in a reporting format. To make such a pretense effective for an audience, it has to admit some true
statements and to acknowledge some evidence that does not support the point of view being advocated. Hence this twisting of evidence, while it is a typical feature of propaganda, is not so constant that it makes propaganda exhibit the hardened form of bias as an essential characteristic. Propaganda has a tendency to interpret evidence in such a way that it supports the advocated viewpoint, but it also often makes a pretense of being impartial, which requires an admitting of some evidence that may support the opposed viewpoint.

9. Deceptiveness and Relevance in Propaganda

Bernays (1923, p. 212) distinguished between education and propaganda by defining the former as “the advocacy of what we believe” and the latter as “the advocacy of what we do not believe.” This definition makes propaganda a species of lying, that is, of advocating as true something one does not believe is true. Certainly, it makes propaganda deceptive in a way that makes it an insincere or dishonest kind of advocacy. But is propaganda necessarily insincere or deceptive in this way? It would seem not, for it is possible to put forward propaganda for a cause the propagandist believes in, and not all propaganda consists in saying what is false or what is known or believed to be false.

What then does the deceptiveness of propaganda consist in? The deceptiveness of propaganda is not just due to the conveying of statements that are known or believed to be false, which is really more of an accidental feature of it. The deceptiveness is due to the format within which propaganda is typically presented. For example, the news reports in Nazi Germany mixed factual reporting in with the lies and distortions to enhance the credibility of the message reported. The audience may well have been aware that what was presented to them was propaganda—that is, biased advocacy of a cause—but its presentation in the news format set in place an expectation that the function of the discourse was to report the news. Thus the deception, the clever illusion that is at the basis of propaganda as an effective kind of advocacy, is the expectation of the audience concerning the type of discourse that is supposedly being engaged in. Because it is placed within a format, like news reporting, propaganda of this kind is designed to look like information-seeking dialogue. The appearance presented is that information is being reported to the mass audience through the media. Information-seeking dialogue normally (or at least supposedly) has a balanced format of reporting facts. Thus, propaganda in such a setting is not likely to be so easily dismissed.
Deceptiveness and Relevance in Propaganda

as simple partisanship and promotion deliberately used to get compliance to action by appealing to emotions and working on the audience psychologically.

So the explanation of the deceptiveness of propaganda that makes it a kind of discourse that can be used effectively for persuasion to a course of action is the dialectical shift, or change from one type of dialogue to another. By invoking a context familiar to the audience, expectations are put in place that one particular type of dialogue is being engaged in. But the reality is that a quite different sort of dialogue is being engaged in (unilaterally, and generally without the other side knowing about the real purpose of the discourse).

It is exactly this kind of dialectical shift from one type of dialogue to another that underlies the evaluation of the logic textbooks of the argumentum ad populum as a fallacy of relevance. In itself, there is nothing logically fallacious about appealing to enthusiasms of a crowd or to popular beliefs, if you are trying to get a mass audience to accept a conclusion they did not accept before or to commit to a policy of action. But such an argument would be irrelevant, and could be fallacious on such grounds, because the speaker was supposed to be engaged in convincing the audience with rational arguments that presented all the available evidence on both sides in a calm and dispassionate way. So the question of relevance depends on an assessment, in a given case, of what the speaker was supposed to be doing in the given situation. The question is one of what type of dialogue she was supposed to be engaged in (as known or reasonably presumed in a given case).

The next question is whether this kind of deceptiveness, which is associated with the failure of dialectical relevance, or relevance of use of arguments in a purposive context of dialogue, is essential to propaganda. Does it have to be present for a given instance of discourse to qualify as propaganda? The answer is that it does not. If it has already been made clear at the outset that the purpose of an advertisement is to sell a product or that the purpose of a speech is to rouse crowd enthusiasm to support a cause, there need not be any deception to try to pretend that the discourse is supposed to be a critical discussion of the issue or a balanced deliberation on what could be the prudent course of action. Such an advertisement or speech could be described as propaganda, because it is based on an appeal to the people and has all the other characteristics of propaganda, but the arguments used in it could be dialectically relevant. In such a case, then, an argument that appeals to the people to sell the product or to get support for the cause could be dialectically relevant
within the discourse (in relation to the goals for this type of dialogue). There has been no dialectical shift, no failure of relevance, no deception, and no fallacy.

To judge the dialectical relevance of an argument used in a particular case, a critic has to look at the direction the argument is taking. Then he must identify the goal of the type of dialogue the participants are supposed to be engaged in. Then he must ask whether the argument could (actually or potentially) be used to contribute to that goal. For example, if the discourse is supposed to be a critical discussion, an argument used in that discourse is dialectically relevant if it could be used to help resolve the conflict of opinions at issue in the discussion. This can be done by supporting (or refuting) the point of view on one side or the other of the conflict. Advocacy in a critical discussion is not inherently wrong.

The question is thus raised: when is an argument dialectically relevant as used in propaganda (assuming there has been no dialectical shift from another type of discourse)? As expressed in the seventh characteristic of propaganda as a type of discourse, the goal of propaganda is to get an audience to support the aims, interests, and policies of a particular group, by getting the audience to act in compliance with these aims and interests. The goal of propaganda, somewhat like that of negotiation dialogue, is to try to get the audience or respondent to serve the interests of the person or group who is arguing. Any argument used in propagandistic discourse to contribute to the goal is dialectically relevant. Thus the relevance involved in assessing propaganda as a type of discourse is an instrumental kind. To say that an argument is relevant in this sense is not necessarily to say that it is a perfectly good argument in every respect. It is not to judge it as a rational argument that successfully furnishes evidence supporting the conclusion that a proposition is true or false, or that a course of action is a practically reasonable thing to do, or that to assent to it is a wise policy. An argument also has to meet other requirements to receive this accolade, as shown in chapters 1 and 2.

10. Evaluating Argumentation in Propaganda

The ten characteristics set out in section 6 above give a rational critic a means of identifying discourse as propaganda in a given case where a text of argumentative discourse has been presented. Of course, such an identification is bound to be subject to dispute, because arguers are often very much opposed to their discourse being labeled as propaganda, and may have a lot to lose by such an identification. But the ten defining characteristics at least give relatively clear criteria that may be used to support
Evaluating Argumentation in Propaganda

this identification. The second task is the analysis of argumentation in a context of use in propaganda, to try to find missing premises required to support arguments. The third task is that of evaluating the argumentation. This task has proved the most controversial and confusing. These three tasks characterize the evidence-based approach to argumentation in propaganda advocated in this chapter.

On the evidence-based approach, propaganda is not necessarily against informed, rational, reflective judgment or logical thinking on an issue, in the sense that its goal is opposed to these ways of thinking. Instead, its goal is to get the desired action by any persuasive means. If logical thinking and informed rational judgment work for that purpose, then propaganda can or will use these means. But if these means don’t work, then propaganda will use other means that can or do work, including myths, stories, symbols, group loyalties, group-oriented appeal to the people, popular enthusiasms, visual imagery, and any techniques of persuasion that are psychologically effective. All these ways of arguing can be dialectically relevant in propaganda, and therefore *ad popum* arguments or appeals to the people, the kind of arguments typically used in propaganda, should not be evaluated as irrelevant and fallacious per se.

Our attitudes toward propaganda are highly ambivalent. It is a much more common type of discourse than is generally recognized, no doubt partly because people are given to the verbal practice of describing only the opposed viewpoints as propaganda, while refusing to admit that their own arguments could be so categorized. But it is a type of discourse that can be justified, or at least excused, on instrumental grounds, despite this aversive attitude. Propaganda comes under the heading of what Garner (1993) calls “convenient fictions,” or stories that are useful for getting people to do things and, in particular, for running a state or country. Such convenient fictions have been advocated and justified by philosophers. Garner (p. 89) cited Plato’s advocacy of the noble lie, the kind of convenient fiction in the form of a “caste-fixing myth” used by the rulers to convince the various classes, such as the guardians, that their role is a noble one.

Convenient fictions are also used in Buddhist philosophy, such as the tradition that when understanding is reached, the Buddhist doctrine can be discarded as something only provisionally needed to get there. Justification of the use of convenient fictions is similar to the kind of justification cited for some instances of lying in moral philosophy. For example, Garner cited the case of the Lotus Sutra where a father tells his children a lie in order to save their lives.
Case 3.6

In chapter three of the Lotus Sutra a parable is offered to support the practice of using expedient devices. The parable, told by the Buddha to his disciple Sariputra, is about a wealthy lord who has placed his children in a huge but run-down house that catches fire. The children are occupied with their toys, to which, we are told, they are addicted. When the father cries to them about the fire, they pay no attention, so busy are they with their play. Finally the desperate father hits upon the expedient of telling them that just those toys they most love are outside the door waiting for them. This they hear and understand, and immediately scamper to their safety. (p. 91)

In this case, the father lied to save the lives of his children, and our inclination is not to condemn the lie, at least not as wholly wrong, in the dangerous circumstances. Instead, we see it as an act that, while deceptive, was necessary to save lives, even at the expense of telling the truth. Hence it can be ethically justified.

Propaganda is not necessarily lying, as we have seen. But it is a use of argumentation that is not directed toward the truth of a matter. To justify its use, for example, in time of war, the danger of putting forward balanced arguments that fairly and dispassionately consider all the evidence on both sides of a question is cited. In particular, the danger may be the loss of life that may result by giving information or encouragement to the enemy. Propaganda is an instrumental type of discourse that is justified (appropriately) by the use of argumentation from consequences. Such arguments are not necessarily fallacious, but care is needed to watch for dialectical shifts in using them.

Certain aspects of propaganda are commonly associated with it, but by themselves do not define it or enable a one-step evaluation of it. Propaganda associated with the use of argumentum ad populum in appeals to crowd enthusiasm is often condemned in the context of teaching courses on logic and critical thinking. But such dismissive one-step condemnations (as noted in section 3) tend to be more reflexive than thoughtful. Propagandistic discourse sometimes takes the high ground of pretending to be a rational discussion of an issue, by portraying the opposition as being illogical, deceptive, or dishonest. But this is not an essential property of propaganda, even though it is a characteristic of the quarrel. Propaganda is not inherently deceptive or illogical, but once discourse has been identified as propaganda, it is wise to be on guard to realize that it is not a critical discussion or rational deliberation of the kind that openly examines arguments on both sides of an issue.

Thus some skepticism toward arguments used in propaganda is justifiable and prudent, from a logical point of view of critical thinking. As
Evaluating Argumentation in Propaganda

a normative framework of the use of argumentation of the kind that is worthy of rational assent on the grounds that it provides evidence to support a view, propaganda is not much a friend of logic. It has a kind of dialectical relevance that represents only an instrumental use of argumentation, somewhat like that of negotiation dialogue or eristic dialogue.

The best critical attitude to take toward propaganda is not to dismiss every argument used in it as critically defective, of no value as an argument, or even fallacious. For such an argument may be based on good evidence, and may be a form of reasoning that is rationally compelling. The evidence-based approach recognizes that the argumentation in this type of discourse as a whole is a biased kind of advocacy. It is specifically designed to be persuasive, to get action, and to push for the one side of an issue in as strongly partisan a manner as possible (or is useful for the purpose of getting a particular action). On the evidence-based approach, the best attitude to adopt concerning any argument said to be propaganda is one of careful skepticism, but not one of routine or holistic dismissal with respect to the arguments in the discourse.

On the other hand, if the discourse is supposed to be that of a balanced critical discussion or other type of dialogue that requires a balanced consideration of the arguments on both sides of the issue, then a different evaluation of it as argumentation is called for. Propaganda is an extremely inappropriate and inefficient method of argumentation to fulfill the goals of this type of dialogue. If the propaganda pretends to be one of these other types of dialogue, but covertly and systematically takes the one-sided approach characteristic of propaganda (as defined above) as a type of discourse, then the argumentation should be evaluated as demonstrably irrelevant, on grounds of there being an illicit dialectical shift. The deceptive tactic used here is the device of the concealed shift from one type of dialogue to another, and this is in fact the very type of tactic so often (but not always) used by propaganda to gain credibility.

As shown above and in chapter 6, in some cases, the appeal to the people can be evaluated as a fallacious argument. But the evidence required to support the charge must be based on an assessment of the purpose of the discourse the argument is supposed to be part of, as compared with the way the argument has been put forward in the text of discourse of the case. This evidence can then be used to support (or refute) a charge of dialectical irrelevance in a given case.

So once something is identified as propaganda in a given case, that is not the end of the story. The job of evidence-based evaluation of the argumentation (and especially the assessment of dialectical relevance)
remains to be done. This job of collecting, analyzing, and evaluating the evidence in a given case is actually quite hard work. It is much easier to use “propaganda” eristically as a negative emotive term to dismiss an opponent’s views and arguments peremptorily. The problem with this approach arises when one’s own arguments are thoughtlessly dismissed as propaganda.