

Sham Universe: Field Notes
on the Disappearance of Reality in a World of Hallucinations

by Doug Hill

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Let me begin by stating clearly where I'm coming from regarding Jacques Ellul: I'm among those who consider him a genius. I suppose that's a safer statement to make here than it might be in some other venues.

I'd like to recall today some of the things Ellul said more than fifty years ago about technology and propaganda in order to assess how his observations on those subjects might apply today. I think Ellul would be saddened by the degree to which technology and propaganda have come to dominate politics and culture in these early decades of the 21st century. I don't think he would be surprised.

My observations will concern what's happening in the United States because that's the only locality I feel qualified to assess. Obviously much of what is happening in the States is happening at the same time and in roughly the same fashion in other countries.

Allow me to set the table, so to speak, with two comments of Ellul's, one from *The Technological Society*, the other from *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*.

In *The Technological Society* he wrote that the distortion of news represents the first step toward "a sham universe," a step that leads progressively and inevitably to "the disappearance of reality in a world of hallucinations." In *Propaganda* he wrote that "Nothing is worse in times of danger than to live in a dream world."

I think it's clear that we've moved significantly closer to the realization of a "sham universe" today than we were when Ellul published *The Technological Society* in 1954. I think it's also clear that it's become very easy today to live in a dream world, and that many people do. Both developments have been brought to you courtesy of the inexorable expansion of technology.

This is decidedly *not* the view shared by many technological enthusiasts. They believe that the access we have today to virtually unlimited amounts of information has made it easier than it ever has been for the average citizen to ascertain the truth while at the same time making it more difficult for politicians and

others in positions of power to obscure it.

In some circumstances it's true that the Internet and other media can expose us to enlightening, empowering information. However, it's also true that the Internet and other media can expose us to vast amounts of *misinformation*, thereby encouraging us to base our opinions and behaviors on distorted perceptions of reality. This has profound implications for the future of governance and society.

Ellul stressed repeatedly that the pejorative connotation attached to the word "propaganda" obscures how we really feel about it. We think we don't like propaganda --- that we don't want to be subjected to it. To the contrary, Ellul said, propaganda has achieved the power it has precisely because we so desperately need it.

Why do we need it? Simply put, because propaganda helps us survive. Another thing Ellul stressed repeatedly is that human beings are not cut out for the pressures imposed by life in the technological society. Technique helpfully offers us various means of coping with those stressful conditions. It does so because, at this point at least, human beings are still needed to help keep the gears of the machines turning, and we can't do that if we crack under the strain. Propaganda is a prop deployed to keep us at our stations.

"There is not just a wicked propagandist at work who sets up means to ensnare the innocent citizen," Ellul wrote. "Rather, there is a citizen who craves propaganda from the bottom of his being and a propagandist who responds to this craving."

What exactly does propaganda offer the harried citizen of the technological society? Many things.

Most practically, it provides a sorting tool. Propaganda tells us what's worth paying attention to. This is a key reason why propaganda has become steadily more important in the era of the Internet. Information is power, we're told, but for most of us wading through the volume of information available today is an overwhelming challenge, one that at some point we simply decline to take on.

"It is a fact," Ellul wrote in 1962, "that excessive data do not enlighten the reader or the listener; they drown him. He cannot remember them all, or coordinate them, or understand them; if he does not want to risk losing his mind, he will merely draw a general picture from them. And the more facts supplied, the more simplistic the image."

Propaganda takes advantage of this situation by giving us pre-digested packages of pre-selected information. It may not be comprehensive or balanced information, but it's all we have time for. What matters is that it's manageable. It's a life raft to cling to in an information tsunami.

As pressing as our need for information manageability might be, there's a far deeper need that propaganda satisfies: the need of individuals living in the technological society for reassurance of their value as human beings.

The technological society is a society of depersonalization, an ongoing assault on individual identity. Our daily experience is corrosive. In a thousand ways we're made to feel anxious, lonely, ignored. We become, Ellul said, "diminished."

Propaganda offers us an antidote to our diminishment. It tells us that we know things and that what we

know matters. That we matter. As Ellul put it, propaganda “justifies” us. Bolstered by propaganda, he said, the individual can look down from the heights upon daily trifles, secure in the knowledge that his opinion, once ignored or actively scorned, has become “important and decisive.”

The implications of this for democracy are profound. If what we seek from the news is existential reassurance rather than accurate information on which to base our opinions and decisions, we have a problem.

Obviously human beings have always been prone to confirmation bias—as Paul Simon put it, a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest. But even though we have access in contemporary culture to a far more diverse range of influences and experiences than ever before, technology allows us to shut much of that diversity out, immersing ourselves in an all-encompassing confirmatory environment much as we immerse ourselves in a warm bath. It also gives us the motivation to immerse ourselves as often and as thoroughly as possible.

At the same time propaganda offers opportunities to find others who feel the same way we do, and opportunities to join with them in mutually-reinforcing groups. In a technological environment of alienation and isolation, propaganda can bind us to a community. But these are highly selective rather than diverse communities. They are actively, aggressively disinterested in sharing discussion and views with members of other communities. The point is affirmation, not an exchange of ideas. This leads, Ellul said (again, in 1962), to “an increasingly stringent partitioning of our society.” The more propaganda there is, he added, “the more partitioning there is.”

So it is that we live in a time when, despite the availability of unprecedented amounts of information, massive public delusions—climate change denial, the missing Obama birth certificate, the fear that vaccinations can promote autism in children, the belief that Saddam Hussein of Iraq was involved in the 9/11 terrorists attacks, to name a few examples—can flourish and successfully resist any attempt at refutation, no matter how well documented.

“Effective propaganda needs to give man an all-embracing view of the world,” Ellul said. “The point is to show that one travels in the direction of history and progress.” This all-embracing view of the world, he added, “allows the individual to give the proper classification to all the news items he receives; to exercise a critical judgment, to sharply accentuate certain facts and suppress others, depending on how well they fit into the framework.”

In my day job as a journalist, I had the opportunity last year to interview a political scientist who studies deception and distortion in public affairs. His name is Brendan Nyhan and he’s an assistant professor at Dartmouth College. One case he examined was the “death panels” controversy that arose in connection with the Obama Administration’s Affordable Care Act in 2009.

The controversy stemmed from claims made repeatedly by former Alaska Governor and former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin that under the Affordable Care Act, bureaucrats would decide which senior citizens are “worthy” of receiving medical care. Her remarks to that effect received extensive news coverage despite being widely debunked.

To determine if more aggressive media fact-checking could correct the death panels myth, Nyhan and two

colleagues conducted an experiment in which two groups were asked to read fictitious but realistic-looking news articles about the death panel claims. The article read by one group contained a paragraph at the end that explained why “nonpartisan health care experts” had concluded that the death panel story was wrong. The corrective paragraph was omitted from the article read by the control group.

Reading the version of the article with the correction successfully reduced belief in the death panel myth among two types of reader: Those who already held an unfavorable opinion of Palin, and those who viewed her favorably but had relatively little knowledge of politics. Opposition to the Affordable Care Act also declined among those readers.

Among readers who were both Palin supporters and relatively knowledgeable about political affairs, the opposite occurred. After reading the corrected article they were *more* likely to believe the death panel myth and more likely to oppose the Affordable Care Act.

Nyhan calls this tendency to cling more tightly to beliefs when they're challenged "the backfire effect."

"We have an intuition," he said, "that political knowledge should be good, that people who know more have more accurate beliefs. In some cases that's true, but in other cases, when we have a motive to preserve an existing belief or attitude, political knowledge can actually equip us to better defend that attitude or belief. It gives us more tools to fend off information we don't like and convince ourselves that we're right."

In the age of the Internet, the tools we have at our disposal for fending off information are as plentiful as the tools we have at our disposal for gathering information. Often as not they're the same tools.

Observing how readily our hunger for reinforcement trumps our hunger for truth caused Ellul to issue one of those statements that has earned him his reputation for pessimism.

“Democracy is based on the concept that man is rational and capable of seeing clearly what is in his own interest,” he wrote in *Propaganda*, “but the study of public opinion suggests this is a highly doubtful proposition.”

There is one more of Ellul’s points on propaganda I’d like to discuss today, and that is what he called “sociological propaganda.”

In contrast to propaganda aimed at convincing people on a specific issue, sociological propaganda articulates a much more general collection of beliefs and assumptions that define for an entire society what is considered normal, acceptable, desirable, and beyond question.

Sociological propaganda is promulgated by television and radio programs, newspapers and magazines (the advertising as well as the articles), by Sunday sermons, by bumper stickers on cars, and by the kinds of cars that carry the bumper stickers. It speaks out from the products on the shelves of supermarkets and department stores and from the mouths of the people we pass on the street as well as from the style of their clothes and the style of their haircuts.

Ellul called sociological propaganda “propaganda as integration” and “a propaganda of conformity.” It seeks to stabilize, unify and reinforce the status quo, and to provide a plausible rationale for the status quo. It helps create, he said, “a general climate, an atmosphere that influences people imperceptibly without

having the appearance of propaganda; it gets to man through his customs, through his most unconscious habits...it is a sort of persuasion from within.”

This description reminds me of one of my favorite Ellul-isms from *The Technological Society*: “Technique doesn’t terrorize. It acclimates.”

Sociological propaganda in our current state of hyper-capitalism is where we see the power of technology come fully into its own. Technology enables an unprecedented degree of immersion in the fundamental message that everything that matters is defined by what you own and what you consume. Indeed, the entire technological society can be viewed as a form of propaganda promoting the absolute normalcy of— you guessed it—the technological society. Thus anyone who doesn’t own a car, a television set, a computer, or a smartphone is viewed as an oddball and a loser. A Luddite.

When I first sent [conference organizer] Randal Marlin a summary of what I intended to talk about today, he suggested I might want to include some “prescriptive” remarks, some suggestions on how the deleterious trends the paper as a whole describes might be countered. Those who have read *The Technological Society* are aware that Ellul specifically declined in that book to offer remedies for the deleterious trends he so powerfully described. Those who have read Ellul’s theological works know that he looked to miracle for hope and the possibility of redemption.

I no longer consider myself a religious person, and among those who know me I’ve earned my own reputation as a pessimist. Thus I’ll limit my prescriptive remarks to a couple of very simple, very obvious suggestions.

Tell the truth to power, as often and as convincingly as you can. Don’t buy the myth that there isn’t any truth, and don’t be afraid to decline propaganda’s invitations to integration and passivity.

One contemporary myth I find especially annoying is the self-congratulatory mantra of aspiring tech billionaires in Silicon Valley who vow that the new platform or new app they’re developing will be truly “disruptive.” All they’re really setting out to disrupt, of course, is a business model whose profits they hope to appropriate for themselves. They’re bravely disrupting one product—one form of self-indulgent consumerism, usually—with another. That’s not what I call a revolution.

So, my prescriptive advice is this: Be truly disruptive. Make some noise. Cause some trouble. Do whatever you can to free yourself and those around you from the web of dreams and lies the technological society so relentlessly spins.

As I said, I’m no longer religious, but I’ll close with a story from the Bible. Jesus has gone to pray in the garden of Gethsemane. The disciples are supposed to keep watch, but they can’t keep their eyes open. They fall asleep. Soldiers enter the garden, arrest Jesus, and take him away.

The message is clear. This is no time to be caught napping.

“Nothing is worse in times of danger than to live in a dream world.”