

Inquiring Minds topic – 10 March 2017

Ed Thomson, moderator

"Facts", "alternative facts", propaganda and how to deal with them

Propaganda should be easy to identify and respond to if you know the facts. How can any of us know the facts? With the prerogative of the moderator I want to recite a personal experience with facts and propaganda.

In 1959 I was part of a student tour that included parts of the Soviet Union. (I must note that no student could get a visa to go on the tour if that student could speak any of the languages used in the Soviet Union.) The United States set up an exhibit of culture and science &c. just outside Moscow and the Soviet Union set up one just outside of New York City. I was curious to see what The United States would show the people of the Soviet Union. The tour was in Moscow on the day the exhibit was to be opened by Nixon and Khrushchev. I went to our embassy and they gave me a fancy invitation to the opening.

The exhibit was in Sokolniki Park which had a stop on the subway. The embassy staff told me how to reach the subway station. However I had no idea which train to take. No one in the information kiosk spoke English or French and would not respond to being shown the invitation. I was flummoxed until a young man of about my age offered to help in excellent English. I accepted and he joined me on the train.

After a time the young man asked if I could get him into the exhibit. With some hesitation I showed him the invitation which had one page in English on which my name had been entered and one page in Russian which had a blank for the invitee. He asked if I would mind if he put down a name that was not his. With more hesitation I agreed. We entered Sokolniki Park and security closed in on "Vitaly" but when I waived the invitation we were ushered forward with bows.

"Vitaly" and I endured speeches from Khrushchev (roughly translated by "Vitaly") and Nixon. We were then allowed to enter the exhibit, part of which was

supposed to be an apartment such as would be found in public housing in New York. "Vitaly" told me that the Moscow newspapers said that the apartment was what the Rockefellers would live in. I protested that it was really low cost housing and the Rockefellers lived in surroundings more like Peterhoff. "Vitaly" then asked how he could accept what I had told him as it was totaly beyond his experience. I did not have an answer for him then and I have not devised one yet.

Each of these exhibits was intended to portray an image to the people viewing them. Some articles on propaganda are attached. Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin are featured as each of them has offered examples.

Please consider how to identify, deal with or respond to propaganda.

"Vitaly" and I were in the kitchen of the apartment in the corridor for the public when Nixon and Khrushchev came in to the kitchen proper and had a few words. This exchange was later portrayed by the press as a debate of some significance. It did not appear to be much to either of us. It became propaganda for each of them.

SEE BELOW - three articles:

PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES TO RECOGNIZE:

1. **NAME CALLING** or **STEREOTYPING**: Giving a person or an idea a bad label by using an easy to remember pejorative name. This is used to make us reject and condemn a person or idea without examining what the label really means. Examples: "Republican", "Tree-Hugger", "Nazi", "Environmentalist", "Special-Interest Group".
2. **VIRTUE WORDS** or **GLITTERING GENERALITY**: These words are used to dupe us into accepting and approving of things without examining the evidence carefully. Examples: "Natural", "Democratic", "Organic", "Scientific", "Ecological", "Sustainable".
3. **DEIFICATION**: This is when an idea is made to appear holy, sacred, or very special and therefore above all law. Any alternative or opposite points of view are thereby given the appearance of treason or blasphemy. Examples: "God-given right to...", "Mother Earth", "Gia".
4. **TRANSFER**: Transfer is when a symbol that carries respect, authority,

sanction, and prestige is used along with an idea or argument to make it look more acceptable. Examples: American Flag, University Seal, Medical Association Symbol (or something that looks like it). This method is also called **GUILT- or VIRTUE-BY-ASSOCIATION**.

5. **TESTIMONIAL**: When some respected celebrity (or alternatively someone generally hated) claims that an idea or product is good (or bad). This technique is used to convince us without examining the facts more carefully.

6. **PLAIN FOLKS**: This is a way that a speaker convinces an audience that an idea is good because they are the same ideas of the vast majority of people like yourself. Examples: "This is the will of the People", "Most Americans...". Another example would be when the speaker tells a story about a family or people that are "just like you" to reinforce the speaker's point of view.

7. **BAND WAGON**: This common propaganda method is when the speaker tries to convince us to accept their point of view or else we will miss out on something really good. The Band-Wagon technique is often used in advertising. Examples: "This is the wave of the future", "Be the first on your block", "Act Now!". You might ask yourself "What if I was the only one on my block because no one else was interested (duped)?".

8. **ARTIFICIAL DICHOTOMY**: This is when someone tries to claim there are only two sides to an issue and that both sides must have equal presentation in order to be evaluated. This technique is used to dupe us into believing there is only one way to look at an issue, when in fact there may be many alternative viewpoints or "sides". Like most propaganda techniques it simplifies reality and therefore distorts it, often to the advantage of the speaker. A classic example is the "intelligent design" versus "evolution" controversy.

9. **HOT POTATO**: This is an inflammatory (often untrue) statement or question used to throw an opponent off guard, or to embarrass them. Examples "Have you stopped beating your spouse", "When will you pay the taxes you owe?" The fact that it may be utterly untrue is irrelevant, because it still brings controversy to the opponent.

10. **STALLING or IGNORING THE QUESTION** : This technique is used to play for more time or to avoid answering a pointed question. Examples: "More research is needed...", "A fact-finding committee is working on this issue..." "I am calling for an investigation on this failure.." When asked about a tax increase possibility a senator replies: "I have always met the obligations I have to those I represent."

11. **LEAST-OF-EVILS** is used to justify an otherwise unpleasant or unpopular point of view. Example: "War is hell but appeasement leads to worse disasters".

12. **SCAPEGOAT:** This often use with Guilt-by-association to deflect scrutiny away from the issues. It transfers blame to one person or group of people without investigating the complexities of the issue. Examples: "George W. Bush got us into Iraq", "President Reagan caused the national debt".

13. **CAUSE AND EFFECT MISMATCH:** This technique confuses the audience about what is really cause and effect. In fact the causes of most phenomena are complex, and it is misleading to say just one of the following: "Tuberculosis is caused by bacteria", "Tuberculosis is caused by un-regulated capitalism that creates poor working conditions", "Tuberculosis is caused by a lack of effective antibiotics".

14. **DISTORTION OF DATA or OUT OF CONTEXT or CARD STACKING or CHERRY PICKING:** This technique is used to convince the audience by using selected information and not presenting the complete story. Examples: "A study was done that showed eating peanut butter causes liver cancer" (the fact that later the study was later shown to be flawed or funded by the peanut butter haters and therefore suspect, is not revealed). A variation would be "Raising the speed limit to 65 mph resulted in many fewer traffic fatalities". Such statements need to be checked with how many people were driving before and after the change in speed limit. Fewer people may be driving after the speed limit change, even though the fatality rates (deaths per 100,000) may be higher, leading to the overall result of fewer fatalities.

15. **WEAK INFERENCE (or False Cause):** Weak inference is when a judgment is made with insufficient evidence, or that the conclusion does not necessarily follow from the evidence given. For example: Ducks and geese migrate south for the winter, therefore all waterfowl migrate south for the winter. Or, most rich folks vote republican, therefore most people who vote republican are rich.

16. **FAULTY ANALOGY:** This is when a comparison is carried to far. Example: "The economy is following the same path as right before the great depression, therefore we will experience a stock market crash soon!"

SLIPPERY SLOPE would be an example of faulty analogy. Slippery slope makes the argument that a shift in one direction will continue to lead to extremes (ex. smoking pot will lead to heroine addiction). It is not necessarily so.

17. **MISUSE OF STATISTICS:** Some examples: Average results are reported, but not the amount of variation around the averages. A percent or fraction is presented, but not the sample size as in "9 out of 10 dentists recommend...". Absolute and proportional quantities are mixed as in "3,400 more robberies occurred in our town last year, whereas other cities hand an increase of less than one percent". Graphs are used that, by chopping off part of the scale or using unusual units or no scale, distort the appearance of the result. Results

are reported with misleading precision. For example, representing 13 out of 19 students as 68.42105 percent.

18. FEAR: "Of course the people don't want war. But after all, it's the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it's always a simple matter to drag the people along whether it's a democracy, a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism, and exposing the country to greater danger."

-- Herman Goering at the Nuremberg trials (<http://www.snopes.com/quotes/goering.htm>)

19. ad hominem ATTACK (also called Deflection): You attack the messenger, instead of the argument or evidence that is presented.


20. tu quoque ATTACK: Pronounced too-kwo-kwee. This technique is when you respond to your opponent by accusing them of committing a logical fallacy or propaganda technique instead of addressing the claim of your opponent's argument and evidence. Ex. "You too are using fear as a propaganda technique"

21. Preemptive Framing: "Frame an issue before other people get a chance to" (George Lakoff - On the Media Jan 2017) Ex. "The only reason the hacking of the poorly defended DNC (Democratic National Committee) is discussed, is that the loss by the Dems was so big that they were totally embarrassed" -Donald Trump. When in fact the Dems did not lose big, nor was it their fault that they got hacked.

22. Diversion: When a major issue comes up that is embarrassing or threatening, so a diversion is created so attention is directed away from the issue.

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The Kremlin Would Be Proud of Trump's Propaganda Playbook

 www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/11/trump-russia-kremlin-propaganda-tactics

On April 16, 2015, one month after Russian soldiers entered eastern Ukraine and [joined Moscow-backed separatists](#) in the slaughter of more than [130 Ukrainian troops](#) in a town called Debaltseve, Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to perpetuate a claim that was growing increasingly ludicrous. "I can tell you outright and unequivocally that there are no Russian troops in Ukraine," he [declared](#) in [a broadcast](#) to the Russian people.

The denial was a classic propaganda move. "The first Russian approach to negative reporting or comment is to dismiss it, either by denying the allegations on the ground, or denigrating the one who makes them," [writes](#) Ben Nimmo, a British-based analyst of Russian information warfare and strategy. Specifically, this approach is an example of dismissal, one of four distinct ways the Putin government tries to spin facts and misinform the public, as identified by Nimmo. He calls it the [4D Approach](#): dismiss, distract, distort, and dismay.

Though Putin has put these tactics to good use, he did not invent them. Nor is he the only image-conscious, scrutiny-averse world leader to employ them. Over the past months, President-elect Donald

Trump has also proved adept at using the propaganda techniques Nimmo describes. "The fact that the Trump campaign is doing the same kind of thing does not necessarily mean that they got it from Russia. These techniques are pretty universal; it's just there's a commonality of approach," Nimmo says.

Some examples of The Donald's mastery of the four Ds of propaganda:

Dismiss: Dismissing uncomfortable allegations or facts is second nature to most politicians. When nine women accused Trump of groping or kissing them without their consent, he first accused Hillary Clinton's campaign of orchestrating the allegations. A day later, during the third presidential debate, he claimed, [falsely](#), "Those stories have been largely debunked."

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Throughout his campaign, Trump [repeatedly dismissed](#) the press as "scum," "horrible people," and "[dishonest](#)." In the week since winning the election, he has taken to Twitter on [six occasions](#) to excoriate the *New York Times* and its coverage, casting it as "very poor" and "highly inaccurate." Unsurprisingly, as Philip Bump of the *Washington Post* points out, Trump's complaints about the *New York Times* are most commonly about stories that have proved true. But, dismissal plays well with Trump's supporters, who are already inclined to distrust the mainstream media. "Why would you listen to your critic if he is intrinsically not worth listening to?" notes Nimmo.

Distract: Another way propagandists dodge facts is to throw out distracting stories or counterclaims. For example, when Western countries condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2015, the Kremlin [shot back](#) by claiming that NATO did the same thing with Kosovo during the late 1990s. That wasn't accurate, but, as Nimmo explains, "The point is not to convince anyone, the point is to put you on the back foot."

Trump's standout moment of distraction came when he was asked about the *Access Hollywood* video during the second presidential debate. Rather than addressing his taped boasts of grabbing women "by the pussy", [he went after](#) Bill Clinton. "There's never been anybody in the history of politics in this nation that's been so abusive to women," he said. Then he pivoted to Hillary Clinton, accusing her of attacking her husband's accusers "viciously" and claimed that as a lawyer, she once laughed at a 12-year-old rape victim. Clinton responded by quoting Michelle Obama: "When they go low, we go high." This was a smart response to Trump's distraction techniques. "A reasonable person's response is going to be, 'No I didn't,'" Nimmo says. "As soon as you've done that, the distraction technique has worked because the conversation has shifted from what they did to what you did."

Distort: If you don't like the facts, invent your own. Long [after it was shown](#) that a Russian missile shot a Malaysian airliner over Ukraine in 2014, Russia presented doctored satellite imagery to claim that a Ukrainian aircraft shot down the civilian jet.

As has been [well documented](#), Trump is [shameless](#) about [distorting](#) his (and other people's) record. (Trump has earned three full pages of [Pants on Fire ratings](#) from *Politifact*.) Let's look at his claims about his yearslong crusade to prove that President Barack Obama was born in Kenya. In September, Trump said he believed the president was born in the United States and tried to pin the ugly birther episode on Clinton. "Her campaign of 2008 started the birther controversy," Trump claimed. "I finished it."

Dismay: The final tool in the propagandists tool kit is the least subtle. "If you don't like what somebody is planning politically, scare them off," Nimmo explains. For example, in October, Norway [agreed to host](#) 330 US Marines for a training deployment. Russia [responded](#) by threatening to add Norway to its nuclear strike list. (So far, Norway hasn't backed down.)

Trump's use of this tactic could be heard in the mantralike "[Lock her up!](#)" chants at his campaign rallies. At the second debate, he openly threatened Clinton, warning her that, "If I win I am going to instruct my attorney general to get a special prosecutor to look into your situation." When she responded that it was "awfully good" that someone with Trump's temperament was not in charge of the law in the country, he interjected, "Because you'd be in jail."

Even as Trump slings propaganda like a pro, he's also susceptible to it. During the first presidential debate, [Trump said](#) Google "was suppressing the bad news about Hillary Clinton." He didn't cite a source for that information, but the claim had been kicking around in conservative media outlets, including [Breitbart](#), [InfoWars](#), and [Fox](#). They attributed it back to [Sputnik News](#), a Russian government-controlled news agency, which two weeks before the debate had published a report written by the psychologist Robert Epstein that claimed Google's search suggestions were biased in Clinton's favor.

"Create enough doubt for everything so that when the proof comes it is washed in the same disdain for all alleged truth."

The *Sputnik* report [was prompted](#) by a viral video released in June that claimed Google was actively altering search recommendations to benefit Clinton. (Search engine optimization experts [quickly debunked](#) the video.) Interestingly, that video credited a 2015 [Wired](#) article about research conducted by the same author of the *Sputnik* report—Epstein. Nimmo dug into the story [and found that](#) a full six months before *Sputnik* ran the report, both *Sputnik* and its sister television outlet, *Russia Today*, started reporting on Epstein's controversial claims as if they were already proven, interviewing him five times before *Sputnik* released its big report in English and seven other languages.

The ultimate purpose of all this—the 4Ds, the phony news stories, and the [trolls](#) and [bots](#) that amplify them—isn't so much to prove a particular set of facts, but rather to distort information so that no one knows what to believe. This uncertainty benefits the propaganda pusher, whether it is Trump or the Kremlin. "The point is to get people so emotional and so confused that they give up on the debate. And once you've done that, you've silenced the voice of a potential critic," says Nimmo. "If they can do it long enough and if people generally switch off from the mainstream media, it gets so much easier to spread the lies."

What's more, this approach works even when the lies are debunked. "The issue, which is seriously real, is literally tailor-made to be dismissed as conspiracy theory and therefore ignored," says Patrick Skinner, a former CIA case officer who now works at the [Soufan Group](#), a security consulting firm. "That's that whole point of the Russian effort. Create enough doubt for everything so that when the proof comes it is washed in the same disdain for all alleged truth."

"Sometimes when fake news is debunked, among certain circles it actually gives it more legitimacy," says Aric Toler, an analyst at [Bellingcat](#), an [open-source investigative outlet](#). "It's the, 'This is what they don't want you to know,' argument." To effectively combat it, each fake story has to be turned inside out and transparently debunked at every step. News stories that quote experts won't convince skeptics, says Toler. His advice for the news media: "Assume you have no credibility." Perhaps Obama said it best in a post-election interview with [The New Yorker](#): Our new information landscape "means everything is true and nothing is true."

Make Russia Great Again – Susan Glasser (NY Times, 2/18/2017)

Mr. Trump has made clear for months that he doesn't just admire the Russian president's macho persona but considers him, as he said during the campaign, more of a "leader" than President Barack Obama. As recently as this month, in a pre-Super Bowl interview on Fox, Mr. Trump refused to condemn Mr. Putin's repressive government. No surprise then that Mr. Trump's unseemly embrace of the Russian tough guy has given rise to a million conspiracy theories.

But we no longer have to speculate about conspiracies or engage in armchair psychoanalysis. Since the inauguration, we have accumulated some hard facts, too: Both Mr. Trump's rhetoric and actions as president bear more than a passing resemblance to those of Mr. Putin during his first years consolidating power. Having spent those years in Moscow as a foreign correspondent — and the rest of my career as a journalist in Washington in four previous presidencies — I can tell you the similarities are striking enough that they should not be easily dismissed.

Of course, in personality these two are very different: Mr. Trump is impulsive where Mr. Putin is controlled, with temper tantrums and public rants contrasting with the Russian's cold calculation and memorized briefing books. But their oddly similar political views and approach to running their (very different) countries may turn out to be just as important as the Russia-related scandals now erupting around Mr. Trump. You don't have to think he is some kind of agent of Russia to worry about the course he's taking us down.

The media-bashing and outrageous statements. The attacks on rival power centers, whether stubborn federal judges or corporations refusing to get in line. The warnings, some of them downright panic-inducing, that the country is not safe — and we must go to war with Islamic extremists because they are threatening our way of life. These are the techniques that Mr. Putin used to great effect in his first years in power, and they are very much the same tactics and clash-of-civilizations ideology being deployed by Mr. Trump today.

Early Putin was positively Trumpian, his presidency a blitz of convention-defying that conjured up the image of a leader on the march after President Boris Yeltsin's drunken stumbles and the economic uncertainties of the late 1990s. He had the state take over the first independent national TV network, he turned the state Duma into a pocket parliament, he went after uppity oligarchs. He said things that politicians didn't normally say, like vowing to rub out the Chechen opposition "[in the outhouse](#)" and threatening to castrate a French reporter who asked a question he didn't like.

Despite the evidence, Kremlin watchers in the early 2000s took a long time to see Mr. Putin for the autocrat he would become. At the time, many people believed Russia, after the turmoil of the Soviet Union's dissolution, was finally headed for a few decades of stability. Where some, correctly, saw a hard-line former K.G.B. spy determined to restore a strong state, others persisted in seeing a would-be Western-style reformer. "Who is Mr. Putin?" a foreign reporter famously asked early in his tenure.

In retrospect, the best guide to his actions should have been his statements. Mr. Putin did exactly what

he said he would do. I've thought a lot about that over the last year, as Americans have puzzled over Mr. Trump's surprising rise, and whether he really means all those outrageous things he says and plans to follow through with the policy shifts he promises.

Like Mr. Trump's Make America Great Again slogan today, Mr. Putin's version of making Russia great again wasn't particularly ideological, but its gauzy patriotic nationalism basically summed up the Putin plan for making a weakened and demoralized superpower feel better about itself. Mr. Putin considered the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20th century, and even if we Americans didn't always understand what he was up to, he never deviated from his real goal: consolidating authority in the Kremlin.

This may be precisely what Mr. Trump admires the most about Mr. Putin. In a [March 1990 interview](#) with Playboy, Mr. Trump, who had been hoping to build a luxury hotel in Moscow, described his impression of the last days of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev. "Russia is out of control and the leadership knows it," the future American president said. "That's my problem with Gorbachev. Not a firm enough hand."

Mr. Putin's hand has clearly been much tougher. Despite all the apparent reverses, confusion, corruption, lies and economic setbacks in Russia, he remains in control 17 years after his unbelievably unlikely ascent from obscure K.G.B. lieutenant colonel to president of Russia. And that, too, may be part of what Mr. Trump, another unlikely president still so insecure about his rise to the White House that he constantly brings up his election, sees in Mr. Putin and authoritarian rulers like him. He views them as tough guys who speak of strength more than freedom and often seem to judge their success by their own ability to stay in power.

I recently asked Bob Corker, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, why he thinks Mr. Trump has such apparent affinity for Mr. Putin. He shook his head. "I do think there is a degree of admiration for a strongman, I'm sorry," he said. His other theory was that Mr. Trump sees himself as a sort of superhero who would forge a strong bond with Mr. Putin "to show he has the ability to do things that no other president has been able to do."

And this is a Republican who hopes to do business with the Trump administration.

America is not burdened with the history of tyranny and totalitarianism that haunts Russia. We have a 229-year record of success with constitutional democracy that should long outlive the Trump era. And while the trappings and powers attached to the "imperial presidency" Mr. Trump now wields have been growing ever since the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. popularized that phrase during the Nixon era, we also have robust counterbalancing institutions, like a free and independent press and a federal judiciary, that are already demonstrating a deep resistance to the kind of political steamroller techniques that Mr. Putin deployed so effectively in Russia.

Still, as I report from Washington now, it's hard not to worry. When I moved to Moscow the year Mr. Putin became president, it was only a decade after the Soviet Union's collapse. Many Russians still hoped their country would become more like the Western countries they had so recently been barred from even visiting. For all the popularity of Mr. Putin's battle against what he belittled as the chaotic freedoms of the 1990s, I met many people in Russia who yearned for the time when they would take their place at the table of "normal," stable democracies.

Who would have thought that, 17 years later, the question is not about Russia's no-longer-existing democracy, but America's?