Propaganda In Political Advertisement: Canada Experience

A. Introduction

This essay will explore one significant theme from each of the lessons “Total”, “Time” and “Trust” and apply them to examine how the election campaign advertisement of the New Democratic Party (NDP) of Canada functions as propaganda. The main focus of the essay will be a detailed analysis of the themes of “total propaganda”, “information cascade” and “credibility” in the context of the NDP advertisement. An attempt will be made to link these propaganda methods to the methods used by propagandists in the past. Such an analysis will emphasize the fact that total propaganda has the same effect on the recipients of the message irrespective of the system (Lesson 3 Slide 3). The theme that has been chosen from the total lesson is the use of language, religion, health, and economy to disseminate a “total” form of propaganda. This form of total propaganda has its roots in the treatises of the seventeenth-century missionary, Paul Le Jeune. The NDP video incorporates each of these elements to ensure that its propaganda achieves totality. The theme of “information cascade” enhanced by repetition will be applied to the advertisement to explain the significance of Jagmeet Singh’s reiterations of the word “different”. Finally, the exploitation of trust and credibility to influence the audience will be dealt with in some detail.

B. Main Body

Total Propaganda in the NDP Advertisement

The use of various kinds of mass media to approach the targeted audience is not the only facet of total propaganda. According to Jacques Ellul, total propaganda also includes the incorporation of various forms of sociological and psychological manipulation. These methods however require perfect organization and orchestration (Lesson 3, Slide 5). The advertisement of the New Democratic Party makes effective use of all the four principles of total propaganda that were laid down by the seventeenth-century Jesuit priest Paul Le Jeune in his work titled “Relations” (Lesson 3, Slide 9). It has released a separate French advertisement for Quebec, a province that has a large French-speaking community. Addressing the targeted audience in their own language is a useful tool for propaganda and has been effectively used by Christian missionaries across the ages. Thus, certain principles of total propaganda remain unchanged even if the methods employed may vary. The second aspect of total propaganda employed by the NDP is the promise of good health. Jagmeet assures his audience of reduced healthcare costs and presents his skills in Brazilian jiu-jitsu as an emblem of fitness. Jagmeet’s concern for the health of the citizens beguiles the audience into believing that he intends to bring about social change with the objective of helping the common people. This point is driven home by the catchline “In it for you” that appears at the end of the video. Jagmeet’s Sikh faith has also been highlighted in a scene that shows him meticulously tying his turban. His pride in his religion and its status as a religious minority in Canada has also proved to be a useful propaganda device. The mainstream society tends to identify itself easily with an underdog who has “fought” social injustice. Identification with the leader ultimately leads to suspension of disbelief as we shall see later in the essay. Finally, the NDP leader also promises to resolve the economic crisis by bringing about changes in the taxation system. Such control over the county’s economy can

change age-old patterns of the local economy, which in turn renders the people more vulnerable to the influence of propaganda. Thus, NDP's use of various forms of economic, social, and psychological manipulation is "total" in every sense of the term.

The Impact of Information Cascade and Repetition

The election campaign video of the NDP uses optimal repetition and information cascade to create a fleeting impression in the viewer's mind rather than a comprehensive understanding of the policies the party intends to implement. Jagmeet, who personifies the NDP in the advertisement, rattles off a series of objectives such as improvement of healthcare, cutting costs for families, confronting climate change issues, and fighting social injustice. Such a barrage of information, which deliberately denies the viewers the opportunity to think for themselves, is called an information cascade. This is somewhat similar to the effect created by the Train Busters documentary that sought to apprise the audience of the strength of the Canadian Air Force during the Second World War (Lesson 4, Slide 4). By making the best use of the time allotted to them for the advertisement, the NDP and its leader have ensured that they do not dwell much on one issue. The audience is presented only a sequence of half-truths in rapid succession. While reeling off his strategies, Jagmeet intersperses his discourse with optimal repetition. Repetition enhances the effect of the information cascade. Since the viewers are not able to gain a good grasp of every minute detail in the advertisement they retain a faint impression of the idea that is highlighted through repetition. The word "different" is repeated multiple times and so are the themes centered on plutocracy. However, excessive repetition has been avoided as it could induce monotony and offset the impact of the information cascade. At the end of the English and the French ads, the audience is left with the impression of Jagmeet as a leader who is different from the other corrupt politicians, although no concrete evidence or arguments are presented to substantiate the assertion that he actually "does" the right things instead of "saying" them. If one looks back at the history of propaganda, one is sure to find several instances when this theme of relentless information and repetitions was used to influence the audience. Plato himself considered repetition a crucial element of rhetorical persuasion as it has the potential to draw attention away from the weaker elements of the discourse (Marlin 42). While one item of information can make the viewers more aware, surplus information confounds the viewer, who is compelled to over-simplify the message of the advertisement. This is precisely what the NDP seeks to do in this advertisement. It wants the audience to retain an overall positive impression of Jagmeet, irrespective of the authenticity and verifiability of the facts.

The Role of Credibility and Trust in Propaganda

The NDP has used the credibility and trustworthiness of its leader, Jagmeet Singh as a vehicle for propaganda. Such exploitation of trust is an exemplification of the Nazi Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels' strategy of employing prestigious leaders for the facilitation of propaganda (Lesson 5, Slide 3). Jagmeet 's virtually spotless public image in conjunction with the warm approval that he received in 2012 from the widely circulated Toronto Star newspaper made him the ideal candidate for the personification of NDP's election campaign. The NDP's campaign is reminiscent of the propaganda methods employed by Jonathan Carter to win the American Presidential Election in 1977. Carter's advertisement adopted a populist approach and denounced the hegemony of the rich and the powerful over the poorer sections of the society (Seidman 84). In a similar vein, Jagmeet announces that he is "different" from other politicians

and effectively establishes himself as the savior of the poor and the downtrodden. The similarities do not end here. Television commercials portrayed Carter as a common man tending to his garden in an attempt to capture the imagination of the masses. The NDP advertisement depicts Jagmeet as a modest, unassuming man who takes time off to play with children and interact with the common people. These are scenes that are clearly aimed at mainstream society. The attribute of commonness is appealing to popular culture. The mainstream society can easily identify itself with the candidate and this enhances the candidate's credibility. Had Jagmeet declared himself to be "different" from other politicians, the audience would have considered the possibility of a bias in the narrative. However, the NDP leader claims that "people" find him "different" from other politicians. The arrogation of his uniqueness to the "public" makes it difficult to identify the source of the comment. In such situations, the viewers tend to assume that what is being said about the public is true. They tend to believe that the candidate is indeed "different" from the typical corrupt politician because most people think so. Once credibility is achieved through these subtle forms of deception, the unsuspecting viewers are likely to endorse the candidate even if they have different opinions on certain issues.

C. Conclusion

Through the analysis that has been carried out in this essay, we have gained a better understanding of the application of total propaganda, information cascade, and credibility by political parties such as the NDP to influence prospective voters in election campaigns. The credibility of a leader such as Jagmeet Singh can gloss over differences in opinion regarding an issue of public importance. The persuasive effect of credible leadership has been further enhanced by perplexing the viewer with a barrage of information so that he/she inevitably arrives at a highly simplified version of the truth. The propaganda methods also make effective use of health, religion, language, and economy to ensure that the propaganda is total in all aspects. Hence, one can conclude that the advertisement of the NDP functions as propaganda, and the viewer has to be extremely alert to avoid being deceived by it.