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How to Read the Newspapers

*(and listen to the
News Bulletins)*

by Alex Comfort

Medical Association for the Prevention of War.

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READING the news today is an art. That is to say, it is as much an art as dealing with the man at the back door who wants to sell you something you don't want; because, like the salesman, news today has a purpose in life. In almost all countries News exists to make you, the reader, act in a particular way or think certain thoughts, usually material ones. If you want to make it serve its original purpose, that of information, you need to go into intensive training.

The use of news as a means of persuasion isn't always dishonest. News that smallpox has broken out in your town may be intended to persuade you to be vaccinated, but if it is true you ought to be thankful. The trouble with the persuasive use of news today is that (a) it often isn't true, or isn't anything like the whole truth; and that (b) the aim may be to sell rather more questionable remedies than vaccination. News as a form of psychological warfare, deliberately designed to make you hate some people and admire others, without any solid reason, is far too common today in far too many countries. It is also extremely easy, once you see how it is done, to beat the propagandists at their own speciality.

The Association which issues this pamphlet is an association of doctors, not politicians. It is concerned with news and its abuse because it is profoundly worried by the resemblance between the effect of propaganda on public thinking and the kind of thought-processes which characterise lunatics. There is some difference between believing that the Jews and the Jesuits are hiding bombs under your bed and believing that every third person is a Soviet spy or an agent of American Imperialism—but **not much**. The fact that the world is divided today into two halves, and that each half believes that the other possesses horns and tails, is largely due to the use which has been made of news. The fact that within seven years our erstwhile gallant allies have become dirty blackguards, and erstwhile dirty blackguards have become gallant allies, is a result of the same process. To be impartially informed upon every issue in a world where the facts are constantly obscured by propaganda is perhaps beyond most people's capacity. Unfortunately, under the stimulus of fear, hysteria, or hatred—all of which are being assiduously whipped up today—nations of sane individuals can come to act like single

lunatics. Atom bombs, concentration camps and witch hunts are the outcome of that type of process; yet once you see how it is done, you can do a great deal to prevent your own mind from being got at. We suggest that you, and your family, learn to play the News Game—cultivate Newsmanship.

Propagandamanship

The art of propagandamanship is threefold: say it loud, say it often, and attach it to something people care about—preferably something they are scared of. Loudness presents little difficulty to the press and radio of the world; as to frequency, if every mention of the Enemy has its little dollop of spite on top, then that enemy will become unpopular, even among people who only know his name—just as they have come to associate “Oxo” with beef, or Horlicks with “night starvation.” And fear, which is so effective in scaring people into buying toothpaste and soap to remove bad breath and body odour, works just as well in politics. Unfortunately, fear also makes men cruel, irrational, intolerant and inhuman. But there are some zealots who don't care about this so long as they make their point.

The other feature of propaganda is “double think.” George Orwell coined the term for a country where the Ministry of Joy looked after prisons and the Ministry of Peace looked after the maintenance of a chronic state of war. Most people, in most countries, are decent and in their own way kindly. They dislike, for example, torturing people, or burning children alive. If you want to make them do these things, it is essential to make them think two incompatible thoughts at the same time. This is unfortunately perfectly possible and perfectly easy. It is done through the use of language—just as bullocks would probably, if they could read, troop quite happily into a slaughterhouse labelled “Foodstuffs Preparation Centre.” We don't torture people—we display firmness in putting down terrorists. We don't burn children alive—we only obtain results against military objectives. We don't ever kill people—we kill only bandits, fanatical Reds, diehard Nazis. The public doesn't like killing people, especially defenceless civilians, who are the main target in modern wars—unless their faces are hidden by some sort of mask. It doesn't like war—but it is prepared to stand for any number of police actions; “police” suggests the London bobby helping children across the road, not napalm and area bombing. It doesn't like bullies, and respects people who stand up to them—

but it is quite ready to negotiate from strength. The double-thinker is exactly like the man who is a shoemaker, but knows he is also Julius Caesar. In an aeroplane, under the orders of the unscrupulous or the half-insane, he is ten times more dangerous. Yet the trick is so simple that an alert child could see through it.

Against plain lies one has little defence except commonsense. Against double-think and double-talk, and against the other chief propaganda weapon, the concerted smear, or the continual depiction of someone as an unmitigated villain, or a particular nation as slobbering, criminal brutes (a favourite film technique) the most useful weapon is an ordinary mirror. It is the first requisite of the News Game—on the ability to play which your life (and your capacity to prevent yourself from becoming party to atrocities quite as bad as Hitler's) may depend.

How to Play the News Game

Take any newspaper from almost any country and examine it carefully. You will see that all items in it concern either Our Side or Their Side. (If the paper was written for Their Side, the Rules are, of course, reversed). Select any news item which contains a clear piece of double-think (one containing the words “aggression,” “strength,” “defence,” “terrorism” or “firmness” will do admirably) and hold it up to the mirror—in other words go through it, transposing the two sides. If Our Side are displaying firmness somewhere, what would Their Side do in the same circumstances? “Campaign of Terrorism Against the Local Population,” of course. Our Side “painful necessity”—Their Side “war crime.” Our Side—“Resistance hero”; Their Side—“Terrorist bandit.” And so on. Quite simple, but very salutary.

With more experience, you can begin to write your own news items. Let us take an example. The “hard news” is that the Taurocoprian Government Police have arrested the trade union leader Mr. Ali Baba, distributing leaflets outside the Taurocoprian Town Hall. Case A—the Taurocoprian Government is on Our Side:

“The authorities here are displaying praiseworthy firmness in dealing with subversive activities. Police yesterday arrested Ali Baba, secretary of the Communist-inspired Boilermakers' Union. The Taurocoprian Home Office

states that he was in possession of a large quantity of literature vilifying the Western Powers. His removal from the scene may do much to quiet a tense situation." Headlines: POLICE HOLD RED AGENT. Cheers for firmness, Down with Ali Baba!

Case B: the Taurocoprian Government is on Their Side.

"In spite of the Kremlin's attempts to tighten its grip on Taurocopia, and in spite of savage repression, the Taurocoprian people are fighting back. Local newspapers have recently been forced to admit the arrest of Ali Baba, leader of the largest industrial union, on a treason charge; thereby giving the first official hint of the extent of the Resistance movement. His wife and child have also disappeared, and a "confession" is expected shortly. The gravamen of the charge appears to be the possession of pro-Western literature . . ." Headline: UNIONS CRUSHED BY RED TERROR. Cheers for Ali Baba.

Or, of course,

"The broad masses of the Taurocoprian people are fighting back against the instigators of a new war. On American orders, Taurocoprian police today began to seize prominent workers' leaders." . . . The rest you know. Got the idea?

Now any of these versions may be true. The journalist who writes the column probably does not know which; he does know, however, which side is Right and which side is Wrong, and he is paid to see that you are left in no doubt. Hold it up to the mirror. Unlike human beings—who are usually kind and cruel, wise and silly, by turns (or at the same time)—Their Side hasn't a redeeming feature. If they abolish rationing, it is a measure of their economic difficulties; if they build a hospital, it is a preparation for war; and, of course, any attempt they may make to negotiate or talk peace, however opportune or however clumsy, is sinister beyond belief. Our Side, at least when it means England, is fortunately not yet as perfect in its own eyes as some other parts of the globe, but at least it can bomb military objectives without ever hitting a civilian, make atom bombs that threaten nobody, and so on. Armaments, of course, are wholly and entirely defensive on both sides, and a preparation for aggression on both sides, but not, of course, simultaneously.

In playing the News Game the following Glossary may help you.

Our Side

necessity
Resistance movement
protest
negotiation from strength
defence
security
resettlement
re-education area
liquidate
liberate
refugee
crusade
Free Government
interrogation
firmness
screening

Trump cards—Free World, Over-riding needs of Defence, Law and Order, Western Way of Life. (These are a signal to the reader to suspend all critical thought for the rest of the sentence).

Learn to play the News Game. It may save your life and the lives of others. It is, after all, your capacity for clear thought which comes between the bomb-release button and the finger of a small minority of mental patients in many countries who are prepared to risk the extinction of the species. It is you, not they themselves, who are asked to press that button. You would not burn a total stranger, Chinese, American or Russian, alive individually, by hand. Whether or not you do it collectively and at long range will depend on your skill and integrity in warding off the assaults made upon your sanity by the agents of insanity. And to ensure your success in this task is a medical responsibility.

The Association which publishes this statement was formed to enable doctors to fulfil their professional responsibility in relation to the threat of war. Membership is open to all registered medical and dental practitioners and to medical and dental students. Further information about the Association may be obtained from the Secretary, Medical Association for the Prevention of War, 24 Lansdowne Road, London, W.11.

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Their Side

atrocities
bandits, terrorists
subversion
sabre rattling
threat of aggression
police state
deportation
concentration camp
murder
raze to the ground
traitor
warmongering
puppet regime
torture
repression
iron curtain, purge

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