

Misinformation, Disinformation and Propaganda: A Summary of What to Know May 2026

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“Without freedom of thought, you have no other freedoms”

Definition of Terms

Information *should be accurate and either free of bias or notes its own bias* (e.g., Wall St. Journal leans conservative, NYT leans liberal). To have value, information also needs to be useful for a given purpose (e.g., “news you can use.”) Ex: “Meteorologists predict 100 mph winds in our area by 2 p.m.”

Misinformation *is incorrect information. Mistakes on statistics or dates or other supposedly “factual information” is wrong, but it is not published with intent to do harm.* Ex: “No rain is expected today.” Yet you look out the window and can see a downpour. You may not be able to have a picnic as planned, but no one intended for you to be misled.

Disinformation *is created with the intent to spread rumors, conspiracy theories and other false information and is intended to do harm or to deceive readers, listeners or viewers.* Ex: “Aliens are controlling our weather.”

Deep propaganda *is not just what is being said, but how it is being said.* There are specific linguistic strategies of manipulation to look for: **scapegoating, stereotyping and dehumanization** used in an “Us vs. Them,” or “Ingroup vs. Outgroup” context. Ex: “Our economic slowdown is the fault of climate scientists who are corrupt and dishonest parasites.”

With the growing popularity of political talk radio (PTR) since the 1990s, we’ve seen increased use of both disinformation and deep propaganda. Ninety percent of PTR is on the right.¹ Deep propaganda as well as the profit-driven business model of PTR is built on the attention-grabbing linguistic strategies of “Us vs. Them” (group vs. group antagonism) much more than policy discussion. This same business model is now exploited by ideologically oriented news sites and podcasters (and not just on the right, though that is where most of these outlets exist).

In the book, [*At War with Words*](#), I write a chapter titled “Liberal Parasites and other Creepers.” German-language linguists have been intensively analyzing the language of extremism (of both the far right and the far left) for decades. This is basically a summary of 60 years of research on the language of **extremist propaganda** published by German language linguists, translated from

¹ S. Derek Turner and Mark Floyd. *The Structural Imbalance of Political Talk Radio* (Free Press; Center for American Progress, 2007)

German into English so that American readers can grasp just how propaganda worked to turn heads in German history (both in the Nazi period and under communist KGB/Stasi control in post-war E. Germany).

I describe **7 basic strategies of polarization** used by the far right and the far left in German history as well as by modern political talk show hosts in the U.S. Of these, **scapegoating, stereotyping and dehumanization, are the three most manipulative.**

To defend yourself and others against the mind-altering power of propaganda, you must first *be able to identify a strategy when it is used*. And, of course, it is vital that *you avoid using any of these strategies yourself*.

Scapegoating is about blame. The propagandist provides a focus and an outlet for frustrations and anger. Ex: “When it comes to the breakdown of our society, the basic problem is the liberals. If we get rid of liberals and liberalism, our country would be great again.” There is little discussion of differences between liberal and conservative *policies*, but repeated use of this strategy of *blaming an entire group*. (It’s ok and good to *blame specific policies* if you have an argument to make.)

Stereotyping is the use of impersonal and derisive images to narrow a concept. The propagandist seeks to create a despicable but generic *personality type* e.g. “liberal,” “capitalist,” “migrant,” “feminist.” An example from the left: “*Capitalists are inhumane, greedy, and barbaric.*” An example from the right: “*Liberals are contemptuous, arrogant, gutless whiners.*” Note that neither statement has anything to do with *policy* differences between the two groups.

Dehumanization is the most potent strategy used in deep propaganda. Metaphors of *disease, sickness or filth* are used to *activate revulsion* in the reader, listener or viewer. For example, Hitler labeled his selected Outgroups an “infection,” a “pestilence,” “cancerous,” “poison,” “parasites,” “tumors,” “bacilli,” “vermin,” “leeches,” “bacteria,” “a plague,” “maggots,” and “ulcers”. Dehumanization is dangerous. From repeated use of such graphic images, it was only a small step for propagandists to call for “extermination” or “cleansing” of these “elements” from society.

How to Counter Propaganda

You may be having a political discussion with someone you disagree with – or with someone you agree with. Either way, should you hear one of the above polarization strategies, try to use the following steps.

Drop the Policy Discussion: hone-in on the label that was just used. You don’t need to be nasty about it, but just remark, “Did you just say _____?”

Name the Strategy: “You know saying/calling people _____ is scapegoating/stereotyping/dehumanization?”

If the comment is scapegoating or stereotyping, remember both are about promoting negative generalizations. *Tell a personal story of your positive experience with someone being put-down* (a group, or that individual). The specific shatters the general.

If the comment is dehumanizing, it may be difficult to hear. The more connected you are to your own humanity, the harder dehumanization may be to read/hear. Stay calm but be blunt and direct. Respond by saying *“You know dehumanization is not funny, not ‘edgy’. It does real harm. Dehumanization is an UGLY AND DANGEROUS way to talk about others.”*

If pressed, you can ask “How do you think genocide starts?” and give some examples from Hitler’s labeling above (all documented). And then just leave it at that. You are unlikely to immediately change someone’s language or behavior. Your partner in conversation may shrug it off. But you can plant a seed and walk away.

Conclusion

Those who use these linguistic strategies are generally not doing so consciously. But this is the language of propaganda, and it reflects prejudices. It can create a climate where harm or violence is more likely to happen to groups being targeted. We cannot censor speech, but we can use our own words to push back against extremist speech.

Silence implies agreement: it is a green light. *Each time* we use these counterstrategies, slow a conversation down, and calmly shift the focus to the WAY language is being misused, *we create resistance* and signal a warning light. Resistance requires practice. As you use counterstrategies more frequently in political conversations, you'll also find it increasingly easier to use them.

Click the [link](#) for a video of Kathryn’s public talk on Protecting Democracy.