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Propaganda

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Editorial

Propaganda

Michael Trimble

As we approach the start of a new academic year, this issue sees two guest editorials outlining new developments in medical education within the Province. These look forward to the first intake of students at the new medical school at the University of Ulster and describe the ongoing process of curriculum review at Queen's University. Appropriately, as the editorial board is seeking to raise the profile of the journal among medical students, there are two papers written by students. As the pandemic continues to cast its shadow over the coming Winter there are also several clinical papers relating to Covid.

In the popular press, Covid continues to feature. Sometimes it is hard to see the wood for the trees. As I write, there are conflicting pieces in news media about the need to vaccinate teenagers against the coronavirus. Headlines seem to vary from the factual "Scientists not backing jabs for 12 to 15-year-olds" to the emotive "My parents won't let me get the Covid vaccine" – both appearing on the same screen.¹ The latter piece may be seen to fit in with the view that we are being manipulated. As has been reported, even "members of the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviour (SPI-B) expressed regret about the tactics... about the role of psychology in the Government's Covid-19 response."² Along with the now infamous quote that they advised government that "the perceived level of personal threat" from Covid-19 should be increased because "a substantial number of people still do not feel sufficiently personally threatened".³ Is this government propaganda?

In previous editorials, I have alluded to the writings of Aldous Huxley and Jacques Ellul. Both men understood and warned against the use of propaganda as a means of control of the population by those in power. For Huxley this is a requirement in a society which he terms "over-organised".⁴ For Ellul, propaganda is both a necessary consequence of the expansion of technology or *technique* and at the same time dependent on the technologies which allow mass communication.⁵ What Huxley describes as propaganda is what most understand by the word. It is an appeal to the masses – either rationally, in terms of enlightened self-interest or non-rationally, using "passion, blind impulses, cravings or fears."⁶ Huxley feels that "unlike the masses, intellectuals have a taste for rationality and an interest in facts. Their critical habit of mind makes them resistant to the kind of propaganda that works so well on the majority."⁷ Readers of this publication may be tempted to feel somewhat smug at this point and congratulate themselves on being immune to such crass means of manipulation. Ellul however is not so optimistic about our state. The individual "must make his own judgements. He is thrown entirely on his own resources; he can find criteria only in himself."⁸ Education is no defence. As Konrad Kellan summarises, the intellectual is most vulnerable to propaganda as they absorb the most

information, have a compelling need to have an opinion on issues of the day, and feel themselves capable of making their own judgements.⁹

Ellul also points out the misapprehension that propaganda necessarily contains lies. On the contrary, it may be wholly truthful but fail to mention other inconvenient facts.¹⁰ How the facts are presented also makes a great difference. Is the current crisis in health care because GPs and emergency departments "fail to meet targets" or because demand outstrips the available resource? Propaganda may also misuse statistics to make a point, the use of graphs with poorly labelled axes and differing scales being an example.¹¹

Our presuppositions, our worldview, the "lens" through which we interpret information, also plays a part. In this issue, we reproduce the text of Professor Barry Kelly's 2019 Annual Oration at the Royal Victoria Hospital. Professor Kelly recounts the intellectual debates surrounding what we know as the "Big Bang Theory" of the origins of the universe. Initial opposition to the idea came from those within the scientific community who held to a steady-state view of the cosmos. They felt the proposal that the universe had a definite beginning gave too much ground to the Biblical creation story.¹² Now, even though the "Big Bang" is the accepted paradigm, there is still little allowance for the divine in the scientific worldview.¹³ In a similar way, our worldview will determine whether we view the discovery of maternal mitochondrial DNA originating from a common ancestor¹⁴ as pointing us to Donald Johanson's *Australopithecus afarensis*, "Lucy"¹⁵ or the Bible's Eve.¹⁶

As readers approach a text with biases, authors too have their agenda. Historian Richard Evans gives us some helpful advice for approaching written material. We need to consider the limits of the author's objectivity.¹⁷ Whenever we read a text, we must ask the questions: who is the author, and what are their motives for writing? We should apply this to what we listen to as well.

In a classical education, the first courses of study were in logic, rhetoric, and grammar. Only once these had been mastered could students progress to the more advanced subjects of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. The initial three subjects were termed the Trivium and were felt to be so basic that they gave us the modern word *trivial*. Perhaps it would help if we were all to have a good grounding in grammar, that we would understand the precise use (and potential misuse) of language; rhetoric, that we understood the power and techniques of persuasion; and logic, that we knew the mechanics of thought and analysis. And so, may I conclude by urging you to consider subtleties of propaganda, to reflect on the value of critical thinking, and to take time to be trivial.

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