

## **A Response to Demirae Dunn**

*John Matthew Reyburn  
Boise State University*

Propaganda—it is continually in our face; from the moment we open our eyes in the morning until we turn off the lights at night, someone is trying to influence our lives. It’s scary to think how easily people lie to get what they want. Truthfully, though, we have all done it; sometimes it is even unavoidable. But does that ever make it right?

Demirae Dunn’s prime objective in her article “Propaganda vs. Political Persuasion in Politics: Public Beware” is to educate the reader on the concepts of propaganda. She does this using sly but effective rhetorical choices. What better way to educate than to use the very subject matter in the lesson plan? Dunn does this quite clearly by subtextually illustrating three points, which this essay will attempt to explain in detail. However, Dunn still deserves credit for the creativity it takes to use propaganda in educating the reader on propaganda.

Dunn first broaches the issue by setting a premise that her essay “aims not to attack the strategies of specific parties or candidates, but rather to analyze the facts of the past in order to be better able to make decisions in the future.” She even hints that an unbiased opinion will be formed as “we analyze the propagandistic strategies of Gingrich *and others*” (145; emphasis added). However, she goes on to focus mostly on Newt Gingrich and his 1994 campaign in a very judgmental and negative light. President Lyndon B. Johnson is mentioned in negative terms, but no other contemporary candidate is judged as harshly as Gingrich.

Dunn defines propaganda as “words that manipulatively draw emotional responses from listeners,” emphasizing that the responses involved are “irrational” (as opposed to the more “rational” ones evoked by mere persuasion). But she fails to mention that propaganda is also a one-sided argument that excludes any inconvenient details. Including this detail would have made her essay much too transparent, since no other side of the story is being told except how Gingrich’s tactics are unethical. Dunn argues, “If a promotion has to be manipulative to work, it is unethical. If it is unethical, it cannot be justifiable. This is why Gingrich’s propaganda techniques cannot be justified in any way” (152). Dunn is no longer throwing in “and others,” even though the educated reader is aware that every politician of every political party has been guilty of using unjustified techniques. In fact, Dunn remains so far removed from playing devil’s advocate that it highlights explicitly how propagandistic her work actually is.

Finally, Dunn’s article begins as a gallant crusade for logic but very subtly becomes a play on the emotions of the readers. She subtly stokes outrage at the unfair tactics of Gingrich. When her work is examined carefully, her use of a certain vocabulary becomes very clear: Gingrich and his campaign are described as manipulative, unethical, and unfair. There is no effort to understand the motives behind the methods. There is no mention of how Gingrich is sincere in his beliefs and how he may be making a zealous effort to improve the lives of millions of Americans. The story from beginning to end seeks only to expose his awful nature.

“Propaganda vs. Political Persuasion in Politics: Public Beware,” taken at face value, seems only to illustrate that propaganda is a bad thing, Newt Gingrich is a bad person for using it, and the voting public needs to be aware of manipulative politicians. However, Demirae Dunn’s article

emphasizes in more ways than one that propaganda is everywhere. Even when trying to educate the reader about propaganda, the best way to achieve the desired effect is to use it. The fact of the matter remains that humans are emotional beings; in order to make a point emotions must be manipulated, so propaganda can never be removed from the equation.

The question still remains: does this make the use of propaganda right? The answer seems to be, in certain contexts, yes. At least in politics, propaganda is fine, maybe even good, but it should definitely be expected. A comparison to other contexts can illustrate this point. Although we associate propaganda almost exclusively with politics, it is used nearly everywhere. Think about the last advertisement you saw on television from the Humane Society: pictures of mangled animals looking sad and abandoned, heart-wrenching music playing in the background, with someone imploring you to help by contributing only a small amount of money. The voice-over also explains how important it is for you to act *now* before it is too late. Advertisements like this are very much propaganda, by any definition. Charities are permitted and even expected to use these kinds of tactics. When Dunn claims, “If a promotion has to be manipulative to work, it is unethical. If it is unethical, it cannot be justifiable” (152), is she also claiming that all charities are unethical? Or is there a double standard?

We could argue that politics and charities are too different to compare. With the case of politics, the general assumption would be that individuals are promoting themselves for their own gain. Conversely, a charity is a group of individuals promoting a cause in order to help others. Are these characterizations true, though? Could there possibly be politicians who are truly interested in being elected in order to help others, while some charities are created as an easy way to make a buck? Are the motives behind the action even relevant if something is unethical and therefore unjustifiable?

Charities and politicians both employ propaganda because they know it is the most assured way to engage members of the public in a way that makes them feel compelled to respond. While Dunn’s proposal to remove propaganda initially seems like a good idea, in this age of voter apathy the alternatives need to be carefully considered. Even when campaigns are oversensationalized, people still remain indifferent to the issues; without propaganda, the situation might be even worse. Dunn’s own essay illustrates how difficult it is to remove propaganda even from reasoned academic writing, inspiring doubt that her objective is possible at all.

### **Work Cited**

Dunn, Demirae. “Propaganda vs. Political Persuasion in Politics: Public Beware.” *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* 9 (Spring 2012): 145–54.