

Information as a Problem for Human Freedom: Jacques Ellul's Contribution to Library Science

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Freedom of information is a fundamental commitment of the academic library profession. This commitment, while important and necessary, places emphasis on the harm that results from the absence, not the presence, of information, and generally treats information itself as an unambiguous good. According to the French social theorist Jacques Ellul (1912–1994), however, information creates important problems for democratic societies and for individual human lives. “The free flow of information” is not the problem, he says. “The fundamental problem regarding information resides elsewhere, within the close relationship between information and propaganda.”¹

Propaganda for Ellul is one manifestation of a pervasive, governing feature of contemporary life that he terms *la technique*. Technique is “to seek in everything the absolutely most efficient means.”² Technique foregrounds means, and the ends recede from view. Technique becomes its own end. Whenever we proceed to do something because we can do it—without asking if we should do it, why we should do it, what end it serves, whether that end is good, and how good is to be defined—then technique is at work in us. Ellul's book *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (1954), translated into English as *The Technological Society* (1964), expounds this argument in detail. A subsequent book, *Propagandes* (1962), translated into English as *Propaganda* (1965), demonstrates how technique manifests itself in the sphere of communication. Since its publication in 1962, scholars have viewed this book as one of the most important studies of this subject, possibly *the* most important.

But what more particularly does it mean if propaganda is a method or technique for achieving results, rather than a way of knowledge that seeks to make things understood? In a famous remark, Joseph Goebbels, the chief of the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in Nazi Germany, observed, “We do not talk to say something, but to obtain a certain effect.”³ Some theorists define propaganda as all persuasion-oriented discourse. This definition seems to be so all-encompassing as to be unhelpful if not meaningless. In this paper I will use the definition set forth by Stanley Cunningham, emeritus professor at the University of Windsor. Propaganda, he suggests is

a vast and complex modern social phenomenon, rooted in a series of cognitive disorders in which there is an erosion of superior epistemic values (e.g., truth, truthfulness, rationality and sound reasoning, understanding, evidence along with its procedural safeguards, critical review and evaluation) in favour of cultivating lesser epistemic forms (e.g. attention, impressions, belief, images, information bytes or factoids), as well as downright negative states (confusion, ignorance, misunderstanding, error and falsity).⁴

¹ Jacques Ellul, “Information and Propaganda,” *Diogenes* 5 (1957): 62.

² “Rechercher en toutes choses la méthode absolument la plus efficace.” Jacques Ellul, *La Technique* (Paris: Economica, 1990), 18–19.

³ Quoted in Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Knopf, 1966), x note.

⁴ Stanley B. Cunningham, “Reflections on the Interface between Propaganda and Religion,” in *The Future of Religion*, ed. Paul Rennick et al. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 84. For a full discussion of this definition, see Cunningham's excellent book, *The Idea of Propaganda: A Reconstruction* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002).

Let us now consider what Ellul calls the close relationship between information and propaganda. We have time only for a general overview of his argument.

1. Propaganda uses (true) information

Information is a constituent of both propaganda and, what I will call, following Cunningham, higher-epistemic discourse. No less a propagandist than Vladimir Lenin stated that “in propaganda, truth pays off.” The U.S. government during World War II provided this instruction to its agents: “When there is no compelling reason to suppress a fact, tell it . . . Aside from considerations of military security, the only reason to suppress a piece of news is if it is unbelievable.”⁵ Propaganda and higher-epistemic discourse do not differ according to the presence or absence of information, but to how it is used. “We must make a radical distinction,” Ellul says, “between a fact on the one hand and intentions or interpretations on the other; in brief between the material and the moral elements. The truth that pays off is in the realm of *facts*. The necessary falsehoods, which also pay off, are in the realm of *intentions* and *interpretation*. This is a fundamental rule for propaganda analysis.”⁶

Where higher-epistemic discourse uses information in the service of careful reasoning and evaluation, propaganda uses information—even the same piece of information—in lower-epistemic ways. Information is used to create the desired psychological conditions, and then it is discarded. “The facts, the data, the reasoning—all are forgotten, and only the impression remains.”⁷

2. Information is necessary to propaganda

Access to information is therefore a prerequisite of propagandistic effect. Ellul sees the rise of propaganda in its modern form as coincident with the rise of literacy, education, and the mass media. “A man who cannot read will escape most propaganda,” Ellul notes, “as will a man who is not interested in reading.

People used to think that learning to read evidenced human progress; they still celebrate the decline of illiteracy as a great victory . . . they think that reading is a road to freedom. All this is debatable, for the important thing is not to be able to read, but to understand what one reads, to reflect on and judge what one reads. Outside of that, reading has no meaning (and even destroys certain automatic qualities of memory and observation).⁸

Educated readers, Ellul notes, are more apt to recognize that the information brought to their attention may not be what is most important (and that “importance” is a highly contingent concept), that it may contradict other information, and that “chance plays a large part in the access one has to [particular] information.”⁹ He suggests that the information we receive is rapidly flowing, atomized, and often ambiguous. It does not, on its own, provide explanatory power for human life.

Ellul also notes that the educated person’s information comes mostly second-hand, via publications and the pronouncements of experts. It is not received from those who are personally known

⁵ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 53.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁹ Ellul, “Information and Propaganda,” 68.

and trusted, nor can it be verified directly. Most likely, it concerns matters that only a specialist could verify—and today no intellectual is a specialist beyond a narrow domain. Thus such a person’s “opinion will ultimately be formed solely on the basis of the facts transmitted to him, and not on the basis of his choice and his personal experience.”¹⁰

Ellul describes the educated class of today as a mass of highly mobile and solitary individuals whose psychic reality is to feel entirely responsible for their own decisions, thrown upon their own resources, in a world that appears more and more complex and even catastrophic, and without the meaning offered in previous eras by family, village, or religious community. (Ellul does not say that traditional sources of meaning were necessarily accurate or good for human freedom, only that they did provide a framework of meaning for the members of those societies.) Although Ellul states that “a high intelligence, a broad culture, a constant exercise of the critical faculties, and full and objective information are still the best weapons against propaganda,”¹¹ these conditions are exceedingly difficult and rarely achieved. Since information serves mostly to heighten anxiety and enervate will, the primary experience of most so-called well-informed persons is “inferiority and fear.”¹² Propaganda then steps in and offers relief for this intolerable condition.

3. Information renders propaganda necessary

“Information actually generates the problems that propaganda exploits and for which it pretends to offer solutions,” Ellul says. “In fact, no propaganda can work until the moment when a set of facts has become a *problem*.”¹³ Ellul speaks of what he calls *integration propaganda*, the soft enfolding of our thoughts, beliefs, and actions into a complete outlook or way of life that is offered to us readymade and comforting. It offers its patients a total explanation and a conviction of personal significance. It operates by means of *myth*, another important concept for Ellul, an “all-encompassing, activating image” that serves to situate and valorize human lives.¹⁴ A human being “needs explanations, broad answers to general problems. He needs coherence, an affirmation of his own worth.”¹⁵ All this, propaganda provides. Because propaganda responds to such a deep need in the human psyche, Ellul suggests that people “collude” in their propagandization.

4. Propaganda ultimately triumphs over information

Democratic societies cohere not primarily by force but by the cultivation of public opinion. Coherence is attained via adhesion to social myths and to the attitudes and commitments they engender. The educated class is the most necessary for the cultivation of public opinion. It would seem that here we have an opportunity for higher-epistemic forms of persuasion that seek to honor and preserve human dignity and freedom. But Ellul points out that the battle between propaganda and higher-epistemic discourse cannot be an equal one. “The man who informs honestly must say: ‘Here are the facts, believe them or not as you see fit.’”

And so from this point on . . . propaganda will always triumph over information . . .
Wherever there is propaganda, information, if it is to survive, must utilize the same

¹⁰ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 87.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹² Ellul, “Information and Propaganda,” 75.

¹³ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 114.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵ Ellul, “Information and Propaganda,” 76.

weapons. . . . [It] forces the informant to engage in counterpropaganda. If one wishes to avoid this conflict and preserve independence, objectivity, the dispassionateness of information, then all kinds of propaganda must be forbidden. Strict control must be exerted over the press, the radio, and so forth. This would call for a rigorous censorship. . . . In other words, the guaranty that information would have its full educational effect would rest on authoritarian measures.¹⁶

Because democratic government must be concerned with self-legitimation, it cannot survive without the use of propaganda.

Let us consider a specific example. A government could observe that if the desired result in the context of global warming is a population that supports alternative energy sources, then that population's actual understanding of the complex science of global warming is irrelevant. Which is more important, the government might ask itself: getting the results we want by propaganda, or making an idol of knowledge and venturing on an unnecessary and possibly futile detour into educating the people so that they will be able to make an informed decision about global warming—particularly when we know that other interested parties will be asserting their own propaganda? The plausibility of the propagandistic approach to driving public opinion can tend to draw even non-totalitarian institutions. Simply making an abundance of information easily accessible does not guarantee a future for civilizational concern for knowledge and understanding.

I will now offer several observations for our profession.

First, we can observe that library science as a profession is deeply enmeshed in what Ellul has called *technique*. Library science arose in the late nineteenth century, when technique was asserting itself across all domains of life. Melvil Dewey strongly embodied technique. His passion for efficiency drove his Library Bureau and other library-related innovations, as did his support of the metric system and spelling reform.¹⁷ Ellul does not argue that technique is intrinsically bad, but he reminds us that people tend to believe that “when difficulties concerning the organization of information are resolved, everything will be resolved. This is a dangerous illusion.”¹⁸

Much of our effort within the academic library profession continues to focus on making library-based scholarship more efficient. But what is in fact the relationship between scholarship and efficiency? The University of Chicago sociologist Andrew Abbott has performed an extremely valuable service to our profession by suggesting that since we have not developed an adequate theory of library-based scholarship, we have no way to judge whether these efficiencies do in fact benefit it.¹⁹ We are not able to assess the relationship between means and end.

Second, we can note that our professional concern to oppose censorship—the withholding of information—has obscured for us the equally important concern to understand and oppose propaganda—the use of information in inferior epistemic ways. My recent search in *Library, Information Science, and Technology Abstracts* database produced 2,377 entries with the subject word

¹⁶ Ellul, “Information and Propaganda,” 66–7.

¹⁷ Ellul specifically mentions card files and libraries (*fichiers, bibliothèques*) as examples of intellectual technique. Ellul, *La Technique*, 19.

¹⁸ Ellul, “Information and Propaganda,” 62.

¹⁹ Andrew Abbott, “The Traditional Future: A Computational Theory of Library Research,” *College & Research Libraries* 69 (2008), 524–545.

censorship and just 176 with the subject word *propaganda*. This inattention to the reality of propaganda is particularly troubling when we note Ellul's comment that "all serious propagandists know that censorship should be used as little as possible."²⁰

And third, I suggest that by accepting *information* as the matter with which our profession is concerned, we directly strengthen the power of propaganda by obscuring the distinction between higher- and lower-epistemic forms of communication. Philip Agre, formerly professor of information studies at UCLA, notes that "the term 'information' rarely evokes the troubling questions of epistemology that are usually associated with terms like 'knowledge' and 'belief.'"²¹ If we made knowledge the focus of our profession, rather than information, we would be more interested as a profession in questions of epistemology: how people come to know rightly anything that they do know.

Of course, librarians have adopted the information paradigm because it enables them to render the particular carrier irrelevant: books per se are no longer librarians' particular concern. But Agre reminds us that scholarly communities orient not to information but to "literatures." A literature, he notes,

has a history (founders, milestones, rise and fall) and a structure (founding texts, survey articles, textbooks). Each of these in turn reflects a set of practices (research methods, standards of evidence, forms of argument) and a system of institutional relationships (dominant and dissident lines of thought, powerful and marginal research groups, politics of publication and funding). A research community's insiders read its literature with such things in mind. . . . [A literature maps] a complex and differentiated terrain.²²

The information terrain, by contrast, is flat and featureless. We librarians morselize information so that it can be tagged, stored, and retrieved—directly reinforcing this impression of equality between one citation and the next. "The ideology of information . . . serves to position librarianship as a neutral profession," Agre notes, and "the library presents itself largely as a blank screen upon which particular communities can project their own practices and projects."²³ Ellul, however, would question whether our professional neutrality is even possible, regardless of whether it is desirable. After the informant (let us say, the librarian engaged in collection development,)

has chosen, more or less wisely, the facts which he will bring to the public's attention, he runs up against a second difficulty: how should he present these facts? All on the same level, in the same way, giving them equal importance, so that it will be entirely up to the reader to select and establish his own scale of values? . . . despite appearances, this would not constitute true objectivity; one would be caught in the following dilemma: either to present facts of unequal importance as if they were all alike, and thus falsify reality, or to establish a hierarchy of facts—emphasizing certain ones and giving them a prominent place.²⁴

²⁰ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 16 note.

²¹ Philip E. Agre, "Institutional Circuitry: Thinking about the Forms and Uses of Information," *Information Technology and Libraries* 14 (1995), 225.

²² Agre, "Institutional Circuitry," 226.

²³ Agre, "Institutional Circuitry," 226.

²⁴ Ellul, "Information and Propaganda," 69–70.

Before we conclude that Ellul would urge us to adopt an educational rather than a neutrality model of librarianship, he goes on to note that if the informant does attempt to establish a hierarchy of facts, “there is no assurance that his decisions would be valid,” that is, objectively true.²⁵ Problems adhere to both the educational and the neutrality models.

Conclusion

One definition of *information* often used in our profession is “that which reduces uncertainty.”²⁶ Ellul points to the world’s inherent uncertainty and ambiguity and notes that information in itself does not resolve these conditions. But he also shows us that the problems of information for human freedom are important and interesting. As a profession, we need to move beyond our sole reliance on what we could call the Enlightenment view of information—the argument that truth inexorably overcomes falsity if only it has the opportunity to be proclaimed. This view is transmitted through such classic works as Milton’s *Areopagitica* and Mill’s *On Liberty*, works that are widely taught in library schools as foundational to our professional self-understanding. I would like to encourage us to make Jacques Ellul’s *Propaganda* as well known and important to library science as these other works are.

Addendum: Fatalism and Freedom in Ellul

On first encountering his ideas, one may conclude that Ellul is a pessimist, even a fatalist. If he is right in thinking that democracy has in fact a greater need to deploy propaganda than do other forms of government, and if those who are most motivated to understand and respond to their situation may be most propagandized, doesn’t this mean that our best hopes for human freedom are illusory? I will let Ellul respond in his own voice. In his introduction to *Propaganda*, he speaks as follows:

I shall devote much space to the fact that propaganda has become an inescapable necessity for everyone. In this connection I have come upon a source of much misunderstanding. Modern man worships “facts”—that is, he accepts “facts” as the ultimate reality. . . . He obeys what he believes to be necessity. . . .

In my opinion, necessity never establishes legitimacy; the world of necessity is a world of weakness, a world that denies man. To say that a phenomenon is *necessary* means, for me, that it denies man: its necessity is proof of its power, not proof of its excellence.

. . . Confronted by a necessity, man must become *aware* of it, if he is to master it. As long as man denies the inevitability of a phenomenon, as long as he avoids facing up to it, he will go astray. . . . Only when he realizes his delusion will he experience the beginning of genuine freedom . . .

[I] tend to believe in the pre-eminence of man and, consequently in his invincibility.²⁷

²⁵ Ellul, “Information and Propaganda,” 70.

²⁶ As for example in Allen Kent, “Education for Information Science,” in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, ed. Allen Kent, 47 (New York: Dekker, 1968–), v. 41, supp. 6. This definition is usually traced to Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949).

²⁷ Ellul, *Propaganda*, xv–xvi.