

# DON'T TWEET!

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**E**very intellectual who uses Twitter, I venture, knows the temptation.

Scrolling through your feed, you find something that makes you laugh out loud. Photoshopped pictures. An accusation that may be a little too hasty but delivers a sharp blow to an enemy. An old video of a politician doing something ridiculous. A call to defund police that you may not really believe but conveys your anger about recent instances of police brutality.

I am not talking, in this instance, of intellectuals sharing peer-reviewed articles or news articles from reputable sources or reflections based on their own area of expertise. I am talking about making or sharing memes, satirical articles, blogs, or slogans meant to agitate people rather than provoke thought per se. The issue is whether intellectuals should give into the temptation and share something meant to stir what David Hume called the “violent passions.” And the answer is no. Intellectuals should not make or distribute propaganda.

### **Propaganda Works**

We can learn from John Dewey’s change of mind about the role of propaganda (Tschaepe 2019). Prior to the First World War, Dewey appreciated the role of government propaganda in generating support for kindergarten. Early in the war, Dewey thought that propaganda could generate enthusiasm for the Wilsonian project of spreading democracy around the world. As the casualties mounted and people started to recognize British manipulation of American public opinion, Dewey realized that he had fallen prey to propaganda. When he traveled after the war, Dewey saw how Japan used propaganda to control its population. Dewey’s late writings on inquiry may have been motivated by a desire to inoculate democratic publics from the adverse effects of propaganda.

Propaganda works. Walter Lippmann, Dewey's friend and debating partner, knew this well as a result of his work on the Committee on Public Information, the government agency responsible for generating support for the First World War. More recently, the Big Five Silicon Valley technology companies—Microsoft, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Google—have nearly-unchecked power to influence what information people can access on the Internet. Cambridge Analytica, a company that supported Trump's first presidential campaign and Brexit, is a master of using big data to shape the messages that voters receive on their social media feed. If you find a provocative meme of unknown origin, then there is a good chance that it was made in another country to stir up antagonisms in the United States (Shaw 2018).

### **The Dangers of Propaganda**

The appeal of sharing propaganda is obvious. It taps into the viscera. It can make you laugh, but it almost always makes you angry. When people are angry, they yell at politicians or companies, which often enough leads them to change their behavior. Companies have been instituting zero-tolerance policies on racism that may have led to the firing of an individual who unwittingly made a white supremacist sign caught on camera (Mounk 2020). You can understand why companies are taking this action: people do not want to face the angry mob for supposedly employing racists.

The problem is that propaganda does not make you smarter or more thoughtful. It does not inculcate a habit of mind in which you hear multiple perspectives, and reflect a bit, before deciding on a course of action. It's addictive; people are always on the lookout for the next story to rouse the Furies. People fall out of the habit of reading, writing, and thinking. Propaganda makes people feel like they are doing politics at the same time as they are losing the skills and

disposition to be democratic citizens. People are forgetting how to listen to people who disagree with them (Garrison 1996).

When intellectuals share propaganda, they may win a short-term victory at the same time as they are contributing to the corruption of the public sphere. If intellectuals smear their opponents, then they lessen the chance that they may eventually become friends with them. They also contribute to a politics of smearing, where political campaigns focus on skeletons in the closet rather than serious issues. Intellectuals who share propaganda should not be surprised when the vengeful crowd turns on them.

As Dewey grew to appreciate, intellectuals need to consistently take the high road if they want to support the formation of a democratic public.

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