

Edward Bernays. *Propaganda* (1928)

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Chapter I. Organizing Chaos

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.

We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society.

Our invisible governors are, in many cases, unaware of the identity of their fellow members in the inner cabinet.

They govern us by their qualities of natural leadership, their ability to supply needed ideas and by their key position in the social structure. Whatever attitude one chooses to take toward this condition, it remains a fact that in almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons — a trifling fraction of our hundred and twenty million — who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind, who harness old social forces and contrive new ways to bind and guide the world.

It is not usually realized how necessary these invisible governors are to the orderly functioning of our group life. In theory, every citizen may vote for whom he pleases. Our Constitution does not envisage political parties as part of the mechanism of government, and its framers seem not to have pictured to themselves the existence in our national politics of anything like the modern political machine. But the American voters soon found that without organization and direction their individual votes, cast, perhaps, for dozens or hundreds of candidates, would produce nothing but confusion. Invisible government, in the shape of rudimentary political parties, arose almost overnight. Ever since then we have agreed, for the sake of simplicity and practicality, that party machines should narrow down the field of choice to two candidates, or at most three or four.

In theory, every citizen makes up his mind on public questions and matters of private conduct. In practice, if all men had to study for themselves the abstruse economic, political, and ethical data involved in every question, they would find it impossible to come to a conclusion about anything. We have voluntarily agreed to let an invisible government sift the data and high-spot the outstanding issues so that our field of choice shall be narrowed to practical proportions. From our leaders and the media they use to

reach the public, we accept the evidence and the demarcation of issues bearing upon public questions; from some ethical teacher, be it a minister, a favorite essayist, or merely prevailing opinion, we accept a standardized code of social conduct to which we conform most of the time.

In theory, everybody buys the best and cheapest commodities offered him on the market. In practice, if every one went around pricing, and chemically testing before purchasing, the dozens of soaps or fabrics or brands of bread which are for sale, economic life would become hopelessly jammed. To avoid such confusion, society consents to have its choice narrowed to ideas and objects brought to its attention through propaganda of all kinds. There is consequently a vast and continuous effort going on to capture our minds in the interest of some policy or commodity or idea.

It might be better to have, instead of propaganda and special pleading, committees of wise men who would choose our rulers, dictate our conduct, private and public, and decide upon the best types of clothes for us to wear and the best kinds of food for us to eat. But we have chosen the opposite method, that of open competition. We must find a way to make free competition function with reasonable smoothness. To achieve this society has consented to permit free competition to be organized by leadership and propaganda.

Some of the phenomena of this process are criticized — the manipulation of news, the inflation of personality, and the general ballyhoo by which politicians and commercial products and social ideas are brought to the consciousness of the masses. The instruments by which public opinion is organized and focused may be misused. But such organization and focusing are necessary to orderly life.

As civilization has become more complex, and as the need for invisible government has been increasingly demonstrated, the technical means have been invented and developed by which opinion may be regimented.

With the printing press and the newspaper, the railroad, the telephone, telegraph, radio and airplanes, ideas can be spread rapidly and even instantaneously over the whole of America.

H. G. Wells senses the vast potentialities of these inventions when he writes in the *New York Times*:

"Modern means of communication — the power afforded by print, telephone, wireless and so forth, of rapidly putting through directive strategic or technical conceptions to a great number of cooperating centers, of getting quick replies and effective discussion — have opened up a new world of political processes. Ideas and phrases can now be given an effectiveness greater than the effectiveness of any personality and stronger than any sectional interest. The common design can be documented and sustained against perversion and betrayal. It can be elaborated and developed steadily and widely without personal, local and sectional misunderstanding."

What Mr. Wells says of political processes is equally true of commercial and social processes and all manifestations of mass activity. The groupings and affiliations of society today are no longer subject to "local and sectional" limitations. When the Constitution was adopted, the unit of organization was the village community, which produced the greater part of its own necessary commodities and generated its group ideas and opinions by personal contact and discussion directly among its citizens. But today, because ideas can be instantaneously transmitted to any distance and to any number of people, this geographical integration has been supplemented by many other kinds of grouping, so that persons having the same ideas and interests may be associated and regimented for common action even though they live thousands of miles apart.

It is extremely difficult to realize how many and diverse are these cleavages in our society. They may be social, political, economic, racial, religious or ethical, with hundreds of subdivisions of each. In the World Almanac, for example, the following groups are listed under the A's:

The League to Abolish Capital Punishment; Association to Abolish War; American Institute of Accountants; Actors' Equity Association; Actuarial Association of America; International Advertising Association; National Aeronautic Association; Albany Institute of History and Art; Amen Corner; American Academy in Rome; American Antiquarian Society; League for American Citizenship; American Federation of Labor; Amorc (Rosicrucian Order); Andiron Club; American-Irish Historical Association; Anti-Cigarette League; Anti-Profanity League; Archeological Association of America; National Archery Association; Arion Singing Society; American Astronomical Association; Ayrshire Breeders' Association; Aztec Club of 1847. There are many more under the "A" section of this very limited list.

The American Newspaper Annual and Directory for 1928 lists 22,128 periodical publications in America. I have selected at random the N's published in Chicago. They are:

Narod (Bohemian daily newspaper); Narod-Polski (Polish monthly); N.A.R.D. (pharmaceutical); National Corporation Reporter; National Culinary Progress (for hotel chefs); National Dog Journal; National Drug Clerk; National Engineer; National Grocer; National Hotel Reporter; National Income Tax Magazine; National Jeweler; National Journal of Chiropractic; National Live Stock Producer; National Miller; National Nut News; National Poultry, Butter and Egg Bulletin; National Provisioner (for meat packers); National Real Estate Journal; National Retail Clothier; National Retail Lumber Dealer; National Safety News; National Spiritualist; National Underwriter; The Nation's Health; Naujienos (Lithuanian daily newspaper); New Comer (Republican weekly for Italians); Daily News; The New World (Catholic weekly); North American Banker; North American Veterinarian.

The circulation of some of these publications is astonishing. The National Live Stock Producer has a sworn circulation of 155,978; The National Engineer, of 20,328; The New

World, an estimated circulation of 67,000. The greater number of the periodicals listed — chosen at random from among 22,128 — have a circulation in excess of 10,000.

The diversity of these publications is evident at a glance. Yet they can only faintly suggest the multitude of cleavages which exist in our society, and along which flow information and opinion carrying authority to the individual groups.

Here are the conventions scheduled for Cleveland, Ohio, recorded in a single recent issue of "World Convention Dates" — a fraction of the 5,500 conventions and rallies scheduled.

The Employing Photo-Engravers' Association of America; The Outdoor Writers' Association; the Knights of St. John; the Walther League; The National Knitted Outerwear Association; The Knights of St. Joseph; The Royal Order of Sphinx; The Mortgage Bankers' Association; The International Association of Public Employment Officials; The Kiwanis Clubs of Ohio; The American Photo-Engravers' Association; The Cleveland Auto Manufacturers Show; The American Society of Heating and Ventilating Engineers.

Other conventions to be held in 1928 were those of:

The Association of Limb Manufacturers' Associations; The National Circus Fans' Association of America; The American Naturopathic Association; The American Trap Shooting Association; The Texas Folklore Association; The Hotel Greeters; The Fox Breeders' Association; The Insecticide and Disinfectant Association; The National Association of Egg Case and Egg Case Filler Manufacturers; The American Bottlers of Carbonated Beverages; and The National Pickle Packers' Association, not to mention the Terrapin Derby — most of them with banquets and orations attached.

If all these thousands of formal organizations and institutions could be listed (and no complete list has ever been made), they would still represent but a part of those existing less formally but leading vigorous lives. Ideas are sifted and opinions stereotyped in the neighborhood bridge club. Leaders assert their authority through community drives and amateur theatricals. Thousands of women may unconsciously belong to a sorority which follows the fashions set by a single society leader.

Life [Magazine] satirically expresses this idea in the reply which it represents an American as giving to the Britisher who praises this country for having no upper and lower classes or castes:

"Yeah, all we have is the Four Hundred, the White-Collar Men, Bootleggers, Wall Street Barons, Criminals, the D.A.R., the K.K.K., the Colonial Dames, the Masons, Kiwanis and Rotarians, the K. of C, the Elks, the Censors, the Cognoscenti, the Morons, Heroes like Lindy, the W.C.T.U., Politicians, Menckenites, the Booboisie, Immigrants, Broadcasters, and — the Rich and Poor."

Yet it must be remembered that these thousands of groups interlace. John Jones, besides being a Rotarian, is member of a church, of a fraternal order, of a political party, of a charitable organization, of a professional association, of a local chamber of commerce, of a league for or against prohibition or of a society for or against lowering the tariff, and of a golf club. The opinions which he receives as a Rotarian, he will tend to disseminate in the other groups in which he may have influence.

This invisible, intertwining structure of groupings and associations is the mechanism by which democracy has organized its group mind and simplified its mass thinking. To deplore the existence of such a mechanism is to ask for a society such as never was and never will be. To admit that it exists, but expect that it shall not be used, is unreasonable.

Emil Ludwig represents Napoleon as "ever on the watch for indications of public opinion; always listening to the voice of the people, a voice which defies calculation. 'Do you know,' he said in those days, 'what amazes me more than all else? The impotence of force to organize anything.' "

It is the purpose of this book to explain the structure of the mechanism which controls the public mind, and to tell how it is manipulated by the special pleader who seeks to create public acceptance for a particular idea or commodity. It will attempt at the same time to find the due place in the modern democratic scheme for this new propaganda and to suggest its gradually evolving code of ethics and practice.