
“Canada does not need a ministry of propaganda.” So said The Globe and Mail (October 10, 1980) in an editorial quoted by Jonathan Rose. This time Canada’s national newspaper was wrong. For we live in a propaganda state, and we have done so for at least a generation. All sorts of governments and bureaucracies, large and often foreign corporations, a dizzying array of non-profit groups, and on occasion political parties—in short, an ensemble of both public and private authorities—seek to manage our lives via persuasion and seduction. The propaganda may take the shape of statistic-laden reports, press releases, press conferences, stunts, and hoaxes but, ordinarily, the most visible and most common genre is advertising: government ads, public service announcements, partisan commercials, issue advocacy, charity appeals, corporate-image campaigns, and on and on. Not that this is a uniquely Canadian attribute. The first propaganda state was Bolshevik Russia; the second, Hitler’s Germany. This style of governance was modified and refined in the United States during World War II when, for example, the Advertising Council began to organize public service and public-information campaigns. Now it is the common lot of the citizenry throughout the affluent zone of democracies, one of those regimes of authority that work to discipline and administer. But Canadian leaders took to this style with a vengeance. During the 1970s and 1980s, the federal government was normally the largest single advertiser in the country, a situation rarely matched anywhere else in the world. In addition, the efforts of Ottawa were supplemented by heavy advertising from the governments of Ontario and Quebec, and occasionally other provinces as well. In fact, during the late 1990s the Harris government in Ontario used advocacy advertising aggressively to challenge its opponents and the federal government.

The practice of government advertising has largely escaped scholarly notice. So Making “Pictures in Our Heads” (the title is borrowed from Walter Lippmann) fills a gap by exploring at length a brand of discourse which, according to its author, “is becoming the mode of our public conversation” (p. 20). In various places, Rose offers an extensive survey of the relevant literature on rhetoric, persuasion, advertising, and propaganda, perhaps more useful to students than fellow professors but interesting nonetheless. One chapter probes the history of government advertising, only sufficient to hit the high spots (and even then he does miss the extraordinary war-bond campaign in World War II). Another chapter considers how government ads get made: although the bureaucratic network plays the role of the sponsor, the advertising industry commands the process, just as in the creation of campaigns for consumer goods. Most impressive is his detailed focus on a few campaigns, first on the efforts of the Canadian Unity Information Office (CUIO) to slay the separatist dragon and then to sell the Trudeau Constitution, later on the efforts of the Mulroney government to implement and promote the GST or Goods and Services Tax (which, at $379 million, was more expensive than the involvement in the Gulf War, according to the then-NDP leader).

Rose sees government advertising as a unique kind of persuasive discourse. He is uneasy with the label “propaganda” because it does not speak to “the goals or desirability” (p. 64) of the campaigns. He tries to disentangle government from consumer advertising because often “there is no product” (p. 23). Yet early on he admits that “all government advertising is a kind of propaganda” (p. 12). No wonder: propaganda is any kind of sponsored message which addresses people as citizens and seeks to promote some purpose in the public sphere. How desirable its goals is beside the point. Government advertising, like social or political advertising, endeavours to make good citizens, to encourage right thinking and right action. Very often such ads do tout a product, or rather a “public good,” like the Constitution or the GST or condoms, that would benefit the commonwealth. Even
ads which do not are engaged in unselling because they target a “public bad,” like racism or smoking or drug use. Rose’s focus on government advertising, however legitimate, masks the plethora of social messages (unfortunately he does not give close attention to, say, Ontario’s assaults on sexism and domestic violence) as well as the much wider array of Green nightmares or corporate utopias that seek to condition the public mind in ways that speak the significance of marketing nowadays.

Rose does make abundantly clear how false is the common defence by governments that their messages only seek to inform the public. All messages are persuasive instruments that forward the state’s agenda. Here Rose draws on the lessons of semiotics and rhetoric. He demonstrates that many ads use the technique of “enthymeme,” an argument in which one of the key premises is missing, where the reader or viewer is expected to add what is necessary to understand the claim. So citizens supply B to make sense of the association of A and C: they are involved in the very process of persuasion. Rose argues the correct distinction is between the styles of messages employed to sell non-contentious and contentious policies. The former are more visual, using an ethical or emotional strategy, or what he calls “ethos” and “pathos”—consider many past commercials for Canada Day. The latter are devotees of “logos”: they seek to reason by relying on information and argument. But the reasoning is specious, an illusion, since very often the ads utilize symbols to trigger acceptance—Rose reproduces the script of three Constitution ads to demonstrate the techniques. He does not say much about the contrast between the soft and hard sells, though, perhaps because both are more evident in the realm of the social advertising sponsored by governments to defeat drunk-driving (normally hard), smoking (both hard and soft), and racism (normally soft). Indeed, until recently, Canadian ad-makers often chose a gentle or soft approach to seducing the public, a style that did not cause offense but probably also did not have much impact.

Rose does not exaggerate the impact of government advertising. Instead, he emphasizes that we lack the measures to identify the specific influence of any message, whether in public and private campaigns. So it is not clear that the CUIO effort to sell the Constitution did the government much good. Similarly, polls indicated that the public’s view of the GST actually worsened during the time the ad campaign ran. The most famous flop, at least in recent times, was in the realm of political advertising: the infamous anti-Chrétien ads of 1993 (not 1997 as Rose mentions) sponsored by a beleaguered Conservative party so provoked media and public disdain that they contributed to the burial of the Tories in the federal election. In fact, the import of such advertising depends on an assessment of the total situation: what the media reported, what journalists and politicians said, and how the political and economic environment changed, all of which might serve to explain where the campaigns fitted into the trajectory of the issue. It is a pity, however, that Rose did not find a Canadian example comparable to the case of anti-smoking ads in California in 1990-91 which really did produce a substantial drop in per-capita consumption of cigarettes. That might have served to demonstrate the potential of this mode of persuasion.

In any case Rose does prove that the significance of government advertising is growing and worrisome. Advertising, he observes, “is an impoverished channel of communication” (p. 209) that both reflects and encourages the decline of public talk. I agree: this form of propaganda seeks to undermine debate, construct legitimacy, and encourage compliance. It works more to debase than to enlighten. Unfortunately, Rose does not make use of the discourse theory of democracy elaborated by Jürgen Habermas (who is cited on the question of legitimacy) to fill out his critique. At its core, so Habermas theorized, democracy requires a rational and accessible discourse which engages all kinds of voices and views, something impossible when propaganda dominates the public sphere. This is why government advertising, however inevitable in these days of marketing’s triumph, is fundamentally obscene, an undemocratic exercise funded by the public’s own tax monies.
Canada’s version of the propaganda state is mild and, one might argue, often not very effective. Its impact does not compare with other regimes of authority such as systems of surveillance, Eros as ideology, or the imperative of consumption. But Making “Pictures in Our Heads” is a welcome study of one important dimension of this propaganda state and a fine application of rhetorical analysis to the understanding of advertising. If it should lead its readers to question any of the myriad of messages from government that now pollute the public sphere, that is all to the good. The less promotional noise we accept, the better the health of our (guided) democracy.

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