

# Fact or Fiction: Recognizing the Real 'Fake News'

By: Ruth Nasrullah

Most politicians indulge in it - some admittedly more than others - but as the 2020 election draws near, Ruth Nasrullah gives voters a quick guide to discerning TRUTH's nemesis - "propaganda."



Image courtesy of [FreePix](#)

[Last July 4, hundreds of armed men and women, many wearing camouflage and bearing the confederate flag](#), arrived at the Gettysburg National Park, ready to take on what they expected to be a flag burning by anarchists. No one was there except a man paying his respects, who happened to be wearing a Black Lives Matter shirt. He quickly became the target and law enforcement ended up rescuing him from the park. As it turned out, the Facebook page announcing the flag burning was a hoax.

Similarly, in 2016 [a small group of armed protestors stood outside the Islamic Dawah Center in Houston](#), drawn there by news on Facebook of a large demonstration being planned to battle the "Islamization of America." The Facebook account proved to be run by Russian trolls.

These incidents were driven by propaganda, which has been increasingly driving public discourse to the detriment of truth and fairness. Good citizenship today means learning how to stand up for the truth - and accurately source information you digest.

## **Know Your Enemy: What is Propaganda?**

Propaganda is the deliberate use of inaccurate or misleading information to promote or publicize a cause or viewpoint. There are a variety of identifiable types of propaganda. Here are just a few examples:

- **Testimonial:** This technique uses a celebrity or otherwise popular (or unpopular) figure to claim the value of something without any reference to what it's made of, risks it may have, or even pros and cons. (Hydroxychloroquine, anyone?)
- **Appeal to fear:** As it sounds, this technique convinces people to take an action or adopt an opinion based on the idea that something terrifying will happen to them if they don't. This technique is used in advertising as well as campaigning.
- **Appeal to authority:** This tactic uses the approval or disapproval of an authority figure—such as a politician, clergy, teacher or coach—to convince someone that if the authority believes in it, you must too.
- **Bandwagon:** Just as it sounds, the bandwagon technique is intended to convince people that “everyone else” is doing something, so you ought to as well.



## Trump: A Walking, Talking Guide to Propaganda



Image courtesy on [Unsplash](#)

Pres. Trump's public speech often serves as a compilation of common propaganda techniques. His speech is also interesting in that he uses adjectives far more than verbs. He loves imagery as well—a “big, beautiful wall” or “illegals pouring across the border.” A few of his communication styles are good examples of propaganda.

- Ad hominem: This is a technique in which an argument is made against a person rather than on the substance of his or her argument. He used this technique throughout his campaign and has continued throughout his presidency and beyond.
- Name calling: Dopey, dummy, ugly, loser; he has new nicknames any time someone crosses him.

Why is this propaganda? Because it substitutes negative words or names for facts.

- Demonizing the enemy: Demonizing allows dehumanizing, which allows harsh treatment of groups of people who have been identified as enemies.

*-Inspiring the Leaders of Tomorrow-*

### What can you do?

Propaganda spreads in two ways, [according to philosophy professors Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall](#). A disinformation campaign is malicious; it is a deliberate attempt to mislead, whether for a political or social motivation or goal. Misinformation, however, is not intended to mislead - it's sharing information you believe to be true.

Clearly anyone can become an agent of a disinformation campaign, even if it's not their aim. Try to vet information before you share it. A simple Google search may reveal that there's no truth to it, or that it was spread as part of a disinformation campaign. The [Snopes](#) website is easily searchable and provides fairly detailed assessments of the veracity of online statements.



Undoubtedly, the 2020 election is of massive import. The campaigns—the messaging and the behavior and speech of the candidates—do much to demonstrate their truthfulness and therefore their credibility.

Remember, *Examining the Traces of Tomorrow* propaganda uses an air of certainty, not necessarily a demonstration of facts, to make something appear true. Be ready to question information that seems new, breakthrough or sways heavily partisan. Go to Snopes and share the link with all their references. If required, write a letter to the editor and set things straight. Report questionable or false posts to Facebook, Twitter, etc.

Question statistics, which are easily misused. If someone says A equals B, do a little research to find out if A and B are really equivalent.

Here are some great resources to help you identify and avoid spreading propaganda:

- “[The Art of Thinking Clearly](#)” by Rolf Dobelli lists 99 types of bias that muddy our thinking, and how to recognize and avoid them.
- The [Museum of the Moving Image](#) has a great cross-indexed list of presidential campaign commercials that can be sorted by year and topic such as fear, corruption, taxes or welfare.
- “Mother Jones” recently published a great [interview](#) with Laurel Bristow, an infectious disease researcher at Emory University with a large Instagram following, a platform she uses to set the record straight on a number of conspiracy theories and untruths about coronavirus.



Image courtesy of [Unsplash](#)

Truth is fragile these days and it's our responsibility to question “fact” and either confirm or report. Don't let lies go unanswered, don't spread misinformation, and above all, make sure you understand the hot topics of the day.



**Ruth Nasrullah** is a Houston-based freelance journalist specializing in religion and spirituality, politics and civil rights, and trails and travel. Read more at [www.ruthnasrullah.com](http://www.ruthnasrullah.com).

