

Media and Political Communication

Introduction

When reading the news, looking at candidate websites or viewing election information, it is important to consider how persuasion techniques might be used to influence the viewer. Bias, symbolism, and propaganda are common techniques used to persuade people to think or feel a certain way.

Bias

Bias is a preference, opinion or attitude that favors one way of thinking or feeling over another. Bias affects how people see events and people around them.

Bias in media or political communication can occur in various ways. A journalist or politician can choose to select or leave out certain information in order to persuade the reader to favor one opinion over another. Bias also occurs through the placement of information. If information is featured in large or bold type or in very small type, the author is sending a message about how the information should be viewed. This technique often occurs through headlines and titles on websites. Another way that bias appears is through word choice and tone. If a news story, advertisement or campaign pamphlet contains mainly positive or mainly negative words about a subject, this will persuade the audience to think or feel a certain way. Finally, bias occurs in the way data and statistics are used. For example, during a campaign speech a candidate may share only positive data about their accomplishments rather than the negative in order to convey positive messages to the reader.

Symbolism

Symbolism is the technique of using images or pictures to convey a certain message. Symbols are commonly used in political communication, especially during campaigns. Symbols are often used to associate candidates with images that represent the United States. Common symbols used in political campaigns are the colors red, white, and blue, stars and stripes, the Statue of Liberty and the Liberty Bell. Symbols are also used in political cartoons to convey positive and negative images. Here are some examples of common symbols:

| Symbol | Words or Ideas Represented by the Symbol |
|---|--|
| Uncle Sam, bald eagle, American flag, Capitol building, White House | U.S. government |
| red, white, blue, stars and stripes | American flag, patriotism |
| Statue of Liberty, torch, Liberty Bell | freedom and democracy |
| U.S. Supreme Court building, scales | Justice |
| donkey | Democratic Party |
| elephant | Republican Party |
| dove, olive branch, peace sign | Peace |

Propaganda

Propaganda is another method used in media and political communication to persuade the reader to think or feel a certain way. Propaganda is the method of spreading ideas, information or rumors for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person. Propaganda is similar to bias and symbolism in that they are all used to persuade; however propaganda uses more extreme measures to communicate a certain message. Propaganda relies on appealing to the viewer's emotion rather than reason to convey a message. There are seven commonly used types of propaganda:

Card stacking is the strategy of showing a product or person's best features and leaving out information about any negative features or potential problems.

In a **testimonial** a celebrity or well-known person speaks on behalf of a product or person as an endorsement. In a testimonial a celebrity's message is that if they believe in a candidate, everyone else should too.

When short phrases or few words are used to appeal to particular emotions, it is called **glittering generalities**. Words or phrases such as love of country, home, peace, hope, freedom and honor are used to persuade the viewer to have a positive emotional reaction to the image being described by the word.

The strategy of **transfer** is apparent when symbols are used to convey a message. Political advertisements, websites and campaign materials will often use United States symbols to persuade viewers to believe that a candidate represents America.

Plain folks is the strategy of using ordinary language and clothes to convey to the audience that the spokesperson or candidate is just like everyone else. This strategy is often used in political campaigns. Candidates will take pictures at local restaurants and at ballparks to convey the message that they are an ordinary person, just like you.

In **bandwagon**, an attempt is made to make the viewer feel like everyone is using a product or voting for a particular candidate, so they should too. The viewer should "join the crowd" and not be left out.

Name calling is used to send a negative message about an opposing product or candidate. This technique connects a person or idea to a negative word and convinces the viewer to believe the message without examining the evidence.

Adapted From:

Bias Information - http://indykids.net/main/teachers/classroom_workshops/, Accessed February 2013 and

http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/lesson-plan/Lesson_Bias_News_Sources.pdf

Symbolism - <http://arch.k12.ar.us/apush/files/Assignments/Political%20Cartoon%20symbols.pdf>, Accessed February 2013

Propaganda - <http://www.schooljournalism.org/recognizing-types-of-propaganda-in-advertising/>, Accessed February 2013 and

<http://mason.gmu.edu/~amcdonal/Propaganda%20Techniques.html>, Accessed February 2013