

On The Relation Between Propaganda and Action by Dr Margaret Lowenfeld



Deliberate well designed propaganda can have three objectives:

1. To bring about a change in ideas.
2. To produce action.
3. To stimulate a new and definite type of feeling.

We are dealing here with the second type.

In order that propaganda may produce action its content must act as a stimulus to definite motives for action, these motives therefore must be known and their mode of action clearly envisaged before the form of propaganda is designed and such knowledge must guide the design and content of the propaganda.

Most defined actions (i.e. actions with a limited objective, such as darkening windows or throwing sand on a fire bomb) have definite motivation. A good example of appeal to such motivation is given in Mr. Morison's appeal for fire fighters of Jan 19. 1941

If propaganda, therefore, is designed to produce immediate short term action it must be designed to appeal to motives which are near enough to the surface to respond to immediate stimulus and wisely enough distributed to make a general response possible, or very careful plans must be laid to call gradually into evidence motives not usually in play. Examples of the first type of motive (or feeling) are the Englishman's feeling of independence or love of his home.

If the action which it is desired to produce is tiresome, and demands continuous effort, even of a low degree, to put it into effect, intellectual conviction that such action is desirable is not sufficient to carry it through. Whereas it may be different in other nations more prone to work through the intellect, to see that a course of action is sensible is not enough in the British people to get it put through by a very long margin. On the whole the English are lazy in action, not easily scared, content with their habitual actions, they dislike effort and shrink from new ways (in marked contrast to the American.)

In order therefore to bring about a change in habitual action the carrying out therefore has either to be deputed to the community so that one citizen checks on the other and all the complicated motivations of public spirit, busy-bodyness, power over the neighbour, self importance etc etc can come in to reinforce the general action (as for example in relation to enforcement of house blackout order) or a motive has to be found and suitably appealed to which is sufficient to counteract the force of boredom and inertia and carry the thing through. The first method has been used with success in relation to house and shop black outs; it is unsuitable for road black dangers and for the following reasons:

A house or a factory is a corporate unit and can be treated as such. The number therefore is limited and the units are collected in relatively small groups. Individual pedestrians, on the other hand are far more numerous and in no way clearly defined as units (i.e. soldiers or policemen or school children are defined units)

Houses and factories stand still and independent witnesses can be brought to testify to and record a failure to comply with the law. Human beings are highly moveable and observation of them individually exceedingly difficult, the number is too high and they are too mobile.

If instructions as to the wearing of white are to produce satisfactory results and the number of road deaths to be diminished thereby the quest or question of the motives which might inspire a human being to wear white spots in the dark must be carefully gone into and will serve as an example of the relation of propaganda to action.

Analysis of the situation

To remember to wear white in the dark is a nuisance

To think out the sort of white patch to wear demands definite planning and appropriate thought. Many people think they have not the time for this and certainly many have not the inclination.

To remember to fix the patch even when it has been planned and secured to all garments worn at night or to take it always with one demands a steady conviction and patience which most people have not got.

Why is this?

Concerning the mechanism of action

(The psychology of different cultural types varies and what follows applies only to Great Britain.)

The British as a people have certain characteristics that seem to be peculiar to them. The first is connected with the source of most of their most serious mistakes whether as individuals or as a country.

They are unable (or unwilling which for practical politics comes to the same result) to visualise an event which has not yet happened or a situation which they have not yet experienced. Being unable or unwilling, to do so they are not able to foresee the results either to themselves or to others of such a situation. For them, until it has happened and they can look at it in retrospect it does not exist. The conduct of the present war has proved manifold examples of this type of reaction. (There is here a marked contrast to the German mental organisation.)

Arising out of this inability is a great dislike of precautionary measures particularly if these be personal. The whole of an Englishman's training is against 'taking thought beforehand' and when he does so it is in a shamefaced way and with a feeling that to do so is fussy and old maidish.

A situation which has not already arisen and of which the outlines are inescapably clear, to an Englishman does not really exist, as, with the uncertainties of life it may have changed tomorrow the danger not be there and the precautions be wasted.

The basis of the British character (as it is showing itself abundantly every night in some city or other) is a neglectfulness of own safety and a preference for the general safety.

All the mechanisms therefore, at present in action act against rather than towards the carrying out of road blackout precautions.

Ways in which this situation can be remedied

The difficulties presented by this situation can be got over in two ways, of both of which the present way has given good examples.

1. A government order binding on all citizens can be made

In this case, from the average man's point of view, the responsibility for the 'foolishness' of the order or the ordered behaviour is off his shoulders and on that of the Government. The average man grumbles, perhaps laughs a little and makes a mock of the procedure but will carry out his share of the action automatically as his contribution to the war effort without troubling overmuch if it is sensible or not. The attitude of the average man or woman to the carrying of gas masks illustrates this. Hardly any member of the population believes in the possibility of gas attack or the reality of the danger but good humouredly buy gas mask containers and carry their gas masks when told to. Because told to.

It would be possible to use this mechanism also to secure the wearing of white patches at night but is not likely to be anywhere near as satisfactory unless some standardised disc is served out to all citizens and this because by the order only part of the difficulties are solved (see under)

If such discs were issued the chances are that they would be worn in the same temper as gas masks and with the same faithfulness. To make an order, however, without standardising the response is to make it too complicated for many citizens and to court non obedience. Non obedience to law is always dangerous to the health of the community as prohibition in U.S.A. has shown and never more really so than in war.

2. Steps can be taken to bring home to the citizens personally the immediate consequences to themselves of failure to obey the recommendations

If such steps are successful then obedience immediate and full results at once as a matter of course. We are seeing this mechanism at work every day in the A.R.P. and kindred services. Here the distribution of points of attack by enemy bombers fulfils the need for producing conviction of danger. An interesting study here is the comparative degree of preparedness of towns which have either themselves experienced bombing or been near to towns that have and those in parts of the country where no attack has so far materialised.

There is a major difficulty in putting this into action in relation to road dangers. Towns have a corporate personality and the citizen of any one even if his house is not touched feels concerned in the damage to others. Damage in itself therefore is a stimulus, and fulfils all the criteria of experience necessary to bring about action. Each road casualty, however is an isolated event in itself and even in the case of relatives has little stimulus value since in order for it to act as a stimulus to personal caution the accident has to be visualised and the chain of circumstances leading to it seen as a connected whole and this is just what, *ex hypothesi*, the average English mind cannot do.

As spectators of blackout road accidents are few, the accident is not real to the others and so does not influence their thoughts much less get through to actions. An interesting example of this form of behaviour is shown in the troops reaction to the King's message to the troops in France described in Gun Buster's Return via Dunkirk. Never having experienced defeat, it was not real to them even while it was happening. Words directed therefore to people in a situation of possible retreat had no meaning for them as they did not see themselves as being such persons. In the same way the ordinary Jay walker, never having experienced being knocked down does not see feel himself as a person-in-danger-of-being-knocked-down, and so words directed to such persons pass for the most part unheard by him.

That is to say, road casualties are not real to the general public and figures convey nothing to them

What therefore are the motives that act in these cases and which can be successfully appealed to in the question of protection from road casualties?

It is useless to appeal to the motive of securing personal safety. Experience in London air raids has shown this abundantly. Attack from the air at night when there is nothing else that claims his attention is so obvious a danger that ordinary people will take the simple response of going to shelters. But as soon as something less obvious arises such as the advisability of sending children out of bombed cities etc the old indifference to danger and dislike of obeying a motive of personal safety appears. The Englishman has been trained too hard and too long to believe that to look after himself is contemptible to be able to change this reaction quickly.

To be effective appeal must be made to a motive which is in keeping with, not the reverse of, the other motives which he is day by day obeying. That is it must be linked up with the war effort, and the average citizen be shown that it is his duty as a citizen to wear a piece of white at night.

Furthermore suggested action must be made concrete. (Here Billy Brown is a step in the right direction) Nothing should be left to the imagination.

It must be made clear that in doing so the individual is helping his fellow creatures not himself. He must be made to see that there is a dignity about this action not a fizziness and group feeling concerning it must be aroused.

Concrete Suggestions

To illustrate the foregoing may I make the following concrete suggestions as to how this could be brought about:

1. Deaths on the road should be represented as loss in man and woman power in the national effort.

They should be represented that is as if they were military losses and made real to the people not as figures, which few people can grasp, but as something like this: 'This week on the roads, the nation has lost,

[] mechanics

[] rivetters

[] office workers engaged in national work

[] salesmen

etc according to what the dead people were.

This can be illustrated by little sketches of: the office waiting for its director; the train waiting for its signaller; the children waiting to go back to school for the mother's dinner which can now never be cooked; etc.

With these should go italicised captions pointing out that carelessness in the blackout robs the nation, that no longer does each man or woman live to themselves but their preservation in health is necessary to the nation.

2. Unpleasant as such action would be casualties should be photographed and put on the cinemas together with detailed pictures showing ways actual accidents have recently occurred

Thus 'This month's road casualties in Ealing happened in the following manner. We are showing you four tonight and in the next performance two more. These could all still be alive and working. [] men and women. Tomorrow it may be your turn. If so it will be your choice not necessity.'

or something on those lines. This should go on in all Cinemas in the country for two weeks and then stop, and later two weeks again.

3. **The Press should be asked to cooperate with publication of road deaths in prominent places persistently day by day. Small figures can be grasped and they shock big figures mean nothing. Day by day casualties are far more shocking than once a month.**
4. **Cooperation of the big shops, both for men and women, should be sought for putting on the market convenient distinctive practical white pieces at prices that all can afford.**
5. **Local pride should be enlisted as with the Spitfire Funds and towns made to rival each other. Thus**
65% of Mansfields citizens wear a white piece at night so they say
65% of Blackpools do. etc etc.

Then when the wearing is fairly general so that the exception stands out, as with the house blackouts, the assistance of air wardens etc can be called in to 'arrest' the unmarked waler and make the marked 100%.