

How Does Right-Wing Media Craft Its Message?

A BUZZFLASH GUEST CONTRIBUTION
by Drs. Neil Wollman and Abigail A. Fuller

The following presentation styles were gleaned from an observation of right-wing broadcast media over the months leading up to the 2004 election. (The principle sources were right-wing radio, the Drudge Report and Fox News web sites, and Fox News Channel.)

We use the term "presentation styles" here, but one could also call these "techniques," "strategies," or "propaganda," depending on your take on the intention of the media outlet. No attempt was made to differentiate between the media outlets in the type or amount of usage of these styles--nor was an analysis made of left-wing broadcast media for comparison purposes. It is difficult to judge the effectiveness of such styles in swaying public opinion, but certainly some of what was presented in right-wing media was picked up by mainstream media and so exposed more widely to the public.

1. Highlight a quote from the opponent out of context from a speech or interview. Comments made by Ted Kennedy opposing Bush's policy in Iraq, for example, were used this way. These and similar quotes were then used to paint the liberal establishment as strident Bush haters. Although Teresa Heinz Kerry is not shy about voicing strong opinions, specific quotes that cast her in a negative light were often repeated. This is a way to hurt her credibility and, indirectly, that of her husband.

2. Use loaded terminology to describe a disliked program. For example, use "death tax" instead of inheritance tax or "class warfare" to describe Democratic support of a more progressive tax to benefit lower-income Americans. ([George Lakoff](#) has discussed this in his work on political rhetoric.) An accompanying tactic is to make repeated negative associations with key concepts or constituencies so that they conjure up negative feelings (as with "Liberal" or "trial lawyer").

3. While attacking liberals, promote the idea that it is conservatives who are under attack or marginalized, whether you actually are or not. (Thom Frank notes this in his bestselling book *What's the Matter with Kansas?*) For example, conservatives push the idea of a liberal bias in media, academia, and Hollywood. This keeps the focus on areas of real or apparent liberal strength, without acknowledging conservative or pro-corporate influence in major social institutions.

4. Give coverage--and thus credibility---to right-wing groups and individuals with an overtly biased perspective, while granting some limited coverage to the liberal opposition. Conservative media outlets used this style in covering the Swift Boat Veterans' slam of John Kerry. It can set the agenda of what issues get covered (even in mainstream media), while maintaining one's claim of objectivity.

5. Attack people and their credibility, making them rather than the issue the focal point of discussion. Right-wing media focused more on Kerry's character and personality rather than on his political record.

6. Find some vulnerability in the opponent and make that the focus for evaluating him or her. Pound away on that topic until the opponent is judged only in those terms. For example, right-wing media succeeded in painting John Kerry as a flip-flopper (even when the flip-flopping was exaggerated and numerous instances of Bush flip-flops were uncovered).

7. To divert attention away from a liberal opponent's attack on a conservative position or individual, discredit widely one piece of their argument as a way of discrediting their entire argument. Thus, conservative media (who were followed by mainstream media) gave extensive coverage to the Dan Rather/CBS plagiarism story. This quickly deflected attention from the larger issue of President Bush's questionable National Guard record. (It also made journalists fearful of covering related stories in the future.)

8. Accuse the opposition of doing the same underhanded things to you that you yourself refuse to acknowledge doing to them. For example, although conservatives launched numerous personal attacks on Kerry, they loudly complained about attacks on the president by "Bush haters" (see the first point above). This also tends to make the attacks by conservatives more acceptable given that it is "really" the other side that is the problem.

By the way, a quick perusal of the rhetorical literature revealed that many of the presentation styles presented here were discussed in the section on "Propaganda Techniques" in J. A. C. Brown's 1964 book *Techniques of Persuasion, Propaganda, and Communication!*

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In response, we received this message with further tactics employed according to this researcher.

Dear Professors Wollman and Fuller,

I very much appreciated your recent Buzzflash Guest Contribution. I've been studying the right's rhetorical style for quite some time now (as a layman). I'd like to suggest that in addition to the styles you discussed, I've noticed a few others that may be of interest to track. If you would like I can easily provide you with specific examples from right wing articles and blogs.

1. Be the first. The tactic is to be the first to escalate the emotional tenor of the argument and by the use of "hot button" code words and phrases, such as "infringement of my rights," "you are a bigot," and so on. This immediately puts their opponent on the defensive. I've noticed that most of these charges are projective. That is, a white supremacist will try early on in an argument to call his/her opponent a racist for refusing to respect the rights of whites.

2. Expropriate liberal symbols and culture. No one seems to have noticed this, including Thomas Frank, and yet it appears to be a conscious tactic. For a very long time, the right has, whenever possible, attempted to expropriate people, songs, and texts associated with liberals and the left. A photo of Franklin Roosevelt signing Social Security legislation appeared in a commercial advocating privatization. Daniel Drezner, a conservative commentator and blogger, claims that Reisman's famous article, "The Paranoid Style" describes those who oppose George Bush. Incredibly, even a Bob Dylan protest song was invoked to scold Democrats for opposing Alberto Gonzales [See here.](#) There are many other examples. Among the effects this tactic has is that it dramatically narrows the intellectual/cultural space for opponents to draw upon. Rhetorically, it blurs the meaning of these icons and symbols and marginalizes liberals by stripping them of any unambiguously positive references.

3. Conflation Often, a conservative will write as if the words "liberal" and "socialist" describe the same politics. In the same article, or similar ones, they will claim that communism is identical with socialism. They will then use "liberal" as an adjective: "the liberal Democrat [sic] Party" which rhetorically brands all Democrats as communists, i.e., discredited enemies of America.

4. Nit-picking (combined with changing the subject.) A perfect example was the right-wing attack on the Killian memos. The subject was changed from Bush's dereliction of duty to a detailed discussion of typewriter fonts. All sense of truth was buried under the technical minutiae of the subject. Needless to say, the conservatives who began this were by no means expert on typography. When genuine experts examined the memos, nearly all the details pointed to as "clear evidence of forgery" were debunked. But by that time, it was too late. The entire Bush National Guard story was radioactive in the mainstream media.

5. Flood the rhetorical space. Pack a sentence with numerous falsehoods, misconceptions and biases so that it is difficult, if not impossible, to rebut them all within a reasonable time. For example (a hypothetical one, exaggerated to illustrate the technique): "Stem cell research, concocted and shamelessly promoted by the same Godless biologists that want to ban the Bible everywhere, has one and only one purpose, which is to kill innocent human babies." By the time anyone has corrected all the errors of fact, any conceivable audience open to persuasion has fallen asleep.

In any event, good luck with your research.

Yours,

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