

## EXCERPT FROM:

### SemEval-2020 Task 11: Detection of Propaganda Techniques in News Articles

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#### 1 Propaganda and its Techniques

Propaganda comes in many forms, but it can be recognized by its persuasive function, sizable target audience, the representation of a specific group's agenda, and the use of faulty reasoning and/or emotional appeals (Miller, 1939). The term *propaganda* was coined in the 17th century, and initially referred to the propagation of the Catholic faith in the New World (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012a, p. 2). It soon took a pejorative connotation, as its meaning was extended to also mean opposition to Protestantism. In more recent times, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (Ins, 1938) proposed the following definition:

**Propaganda.** *Expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends.*

Recently, Bolsover and Howard (2017) dug deeper into this definition identifying its two key elements:

(i) trying to influence opinion, and (ii) doing so on purpose.

Propaganda is a broad concept, which runs short for the aim of annotating specific propaganda fragments. Yet, influencing opinions is achieved through a series of rhetorical and psychological techniques, and in the present task, we focus on identifying the use of such techniques in text. Whereas the definition of propaganda is widely accepted in the literature, the set of propaganda techniques considered, and to some extent their definition, differ between different scholars (Torok, 2015). For instance, Miller (1939) considers seven propaganda techniques, whereas Weston (2000) lists at least 24 techniques, and the Wikipedia article on the topic includes 67.<sup>1</sup> Below, we describe the propaganda techniques we consider in the task: a curated list of fourteen techniques derived from the aforementioned studies. We only include techniques that can be found in journalistic articles and can be judged intrinsically, without the need to retrieve supporting information from external resources. For example, we do not include techniques such as *card stacking* (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012b, p. 237), since it would require comparing multiple sources. Note that our list of techniques was initially longer than fourteen, but we decided, after the annotation phase, to merge similar techniques with very low frequency in the corpus. A more detailed list with definitions and examples is available online,<sup>2</sup> and examples are shown in Table 1.

**1. Loaded language.** Using specific words and phrases with strong emotional implications (either positive or negative) to influence an audience (Weston, 2000, p. 6).

**2. Name calling or labeling.** Labeling the object of the propaganda campaign as either something the target audience fears, hates, finds undesirable or loves, praises (Miller, 1939).

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# Technique	Snippet
1 Loaded language	<b>Outrage</b> as Donald Trump suggests injecting disinfectant to kill virus.
2 Name calling, labeling	WHO: Coronavirus emergency is ' <b>Public Enemy Number 1</b> '
3 Repetition	I still have a <b>dream</b> . It is a <b>dream</b> deeply rooted in the American <b>dream</b> . I have a <b>dream</b> that one day . . .
4 Exaggeration, minimization	Coronavirus ' <b>risk to the American people remains very low</b> ', Trump said.
5 Doubt	<b>Can the same be said for the Obama Administration?</b>
6 Appeal to fear/prejudice	<b>A dark, impenetrable and "irreversible" winter of persecution of the faithful by their own shepherds will fall.</b>
7 Flag-waving	Mueller attempts <b>to stop the will of We the People!!!</b> It's time to jail Mueller.
8 Causal oversimplification	<b>If France had not have declared war on Germany then World War II would have never happened.</b>
9 Slogans	<b>"BUILD THE WALL!"</b> Trump tweeted.
10 Appeal to authority	<b>Monsignor Jean-Francois Lantheaume, who served as first Counsellor of the Nunciature in Washington, confirmed that "Vigan said the truth. That's all."</b>
11 Black-and-white fallacy	Francis said these words: <b>"Everyone is guilty for the good he could have done and did not do . . . If we do not oppose evil, we tacitly feed it."</b>
12 Thought-terminating cliché	<b>I do not really see any problems there.</b> Marx is the President.
13 Whataboutism	President Trump <b>—who himself avoided national military service</b> in the 1960's— keeps beating the war drums over North Korea.
Straw man	<b>"Take it seriously, but with a large grain of salt." Which is just Allen's more nuanced way of saying: "Don't believe it."</b>
Red herring	<b>"You may claim that the death penalty is an ineffective deterrent against crime – but what about the victims of crime? How do you think surviving family members feel when they see the man who murdered their son kept in prison at their expense? Is it right that they should pay for their son's murderer to be fed and housed?"</b>
14 Bandwagon	He tweeted, <b>"EU no longer considers #Hamasa a terrorist group. Time for US to do same."</b>
Reductio ad hitlerum	<b>"Vichy journalism,"</b> a term which now fits so much of the mainstream media. <b>It collaborates in the same way that the Vichy government in France collaborated with the Nazis.</b>

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**3. Repetition.** Repeating the same message over and over again, so that the audience will eventually accept it (Torok, 2015; Miller, 1939).

**4. Exaggeration or minimization.** Either representing something in an excessive manner: making things larger, better, worse or making something seem less important or smaller than it actually is (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012b, pag. 303).

**5. Doubt.** Questioning the credibility of someone or something.

**6. Appeal to fear/prejudice.** Seeking to build support for an idea by instilling anxiety and/or panic in the population towards an alternative, possibly based on preconceived judgments.

**7. Flag-waving.** Playing on strong national feeling (or with respect to any group, e.g., race, gender, political preference) to justify or promote an action or idea (Hobbs and Mcgee, 2008).

**8. Causal oversimplification.** Assuming a single cause or reason when there are multiple causes behind an issue. We include in the definition also *scapegoating*, i.e. the transfer of the blame to one person or group of people without investigating the complexities of an issue.

**9. Slogans.** A brief and striking phrase that may include labeling and stereotyping. Slogans tend to act as emotional appeals (Dan, 2015).

**10. Appeal to authority.** Stating that a claim is true simply because a valid authority or expert on the issue supports it, without any other supporting evidence (Goodwin, 2011). We include in this technique the special case in which the reference is not an authority or an expert, although it is referred to as *testimonial* in the literature (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012b, pag. 237).

**11. Black-and-white fallacy, dictatorship.** Presenting two alternative options as the only possibilities, when in fact more possibilities exist (Torok, 2015). *Dictatorship* is an extreme case: telling the audience exactly what actions to take, eliminating any other possible choice.

**12. Thought-terminating cliché.** Words or phrases that discourage critical thought and meaningful discussion on a topic. They are typically short, generic sentences that offer seemingly simple answers to complex questions or that distract attention away from other lines of thought (Hunter, 2015, p. 78).

**13. Whataboutism, straw man, red herring.** Here we merge together three techniques, which are relatively rare taken individually: (i) *Whataboutism*: Discredit an opponent's position by charging them with hypocrisy without directly disproving their argument (Richter, 2017). (ii) *Straw man*: When an opponent's proposition is substituted with a similar one which is then refuted in place of the original (Walton, 2013). Weston (2000, p. 78) specifies the characteristics of the substituted proposition: "caricaturing an opposing view so that it is easy to refute". (iii) *Red herring*: Introducing irrelevant material to the issue being discussed, so that everyone's attention is diverted away from the points made (Weston, 2000, p. 78).

**14. Bandwagon, reductio ad hitlerum.** Here we merge together two techniques, which are relatively rare taken individually: (i) *Bandwagon*. Attempting to persuade the target audience to join in and take the course

of action because “everyone else is taking the same action” (Hobbs and Mcgee, 2008). (ii) *Reductio ad hitlerum*: Persuading an audience to disapprove an action or idea by suggesting that it is popular with groups hated in contempt by the target audience. It can refer to any person or concept with a negative connotation (Teninbaum, 2009).

# Identifying Propaganda In the News

We aim at identifying propagandistic techniques in news articles.

We provide you with a news article and a flowchart to guide you through the identification of propaganda techniques.

The definition of each technique is shown when hovering on the name of the technique in the flowchart.

Click on a technique to open a new page with further descriptions and examples.

You are free to annotate single words, phrases, or sentences, but we encourage you to select the minimal amount of text in which the propaganda technique appears.

Let us look at an example, which includes four propaganda techniques

- **Name calling:** the democrats are being called "babies"
- **Black-and-white fallacy:** obstruction vs progress
- **Loaded language:** stupid, petty, killing
- **Exaggeration:** killing a grandma, stomaching the presence of a person

The screenshot shows a news article snippet with several lines of text. Each line is annotated with a propaganda technique label in a colored box. Line 1: "Manchin says Democrats acted like babies at the SOTU" has "Stereotyping\_name\_calling\_or\_labeling" above "babies". Line 2: "Democrat West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin says his colleagues' refusal to stand or applaud during President Donald Trump's State of the Union speech was disrespectful and a signal that the party is more concerned with obstruction than it is with progress." has "Black-and-white Fallacy" above the entire sentence. Line 4: "In a glaring sign of just how stupid and petty things have become in Washington these days, Manchin was invited on Fox News Tuesday morning to discuss how he was one of the only Democrats in the chamber for the State of the Union speech not looking as though Trump killed his grandma." has "Loaded\_language" above "stupid and petty", "Exaggeration" above "not looking as though", and "Loaded\_language" above "killed his grandma". Line 6: "As Manchin noted, many Democrats bolted as soon as Trump's speech ended in an apparent effort to signal they can't even stomach being in the same room as the president" has "Exaggeration" above the entire sentence.

Use the flowchart as your guide to spot propaganda. Try to get familiar with it. The diamonds will direct you until you end up in a specific technique.

The character between brackets in each technique of the flowchart is the hotkey to select the technique in the annotation software (e.g., if you select a text and press "l" it will be flagged as "loaded language")

## TIPS:

- First and foremost: save your progress from time to time to get sure it is not lost (File -> Save)
- Some sentences might be tricky. Please try to select the right technique(s)
- Your emotions have nothing to do with the articles, as you are requested to spot propagandistic techniques, not their message: try to distance yourself from the contents and avoid being biased.
- One text fragment may include more than one technique at the same time

When ready, click [here](#) to start annotating articles.

Figure 7: Instruction for the annotators.

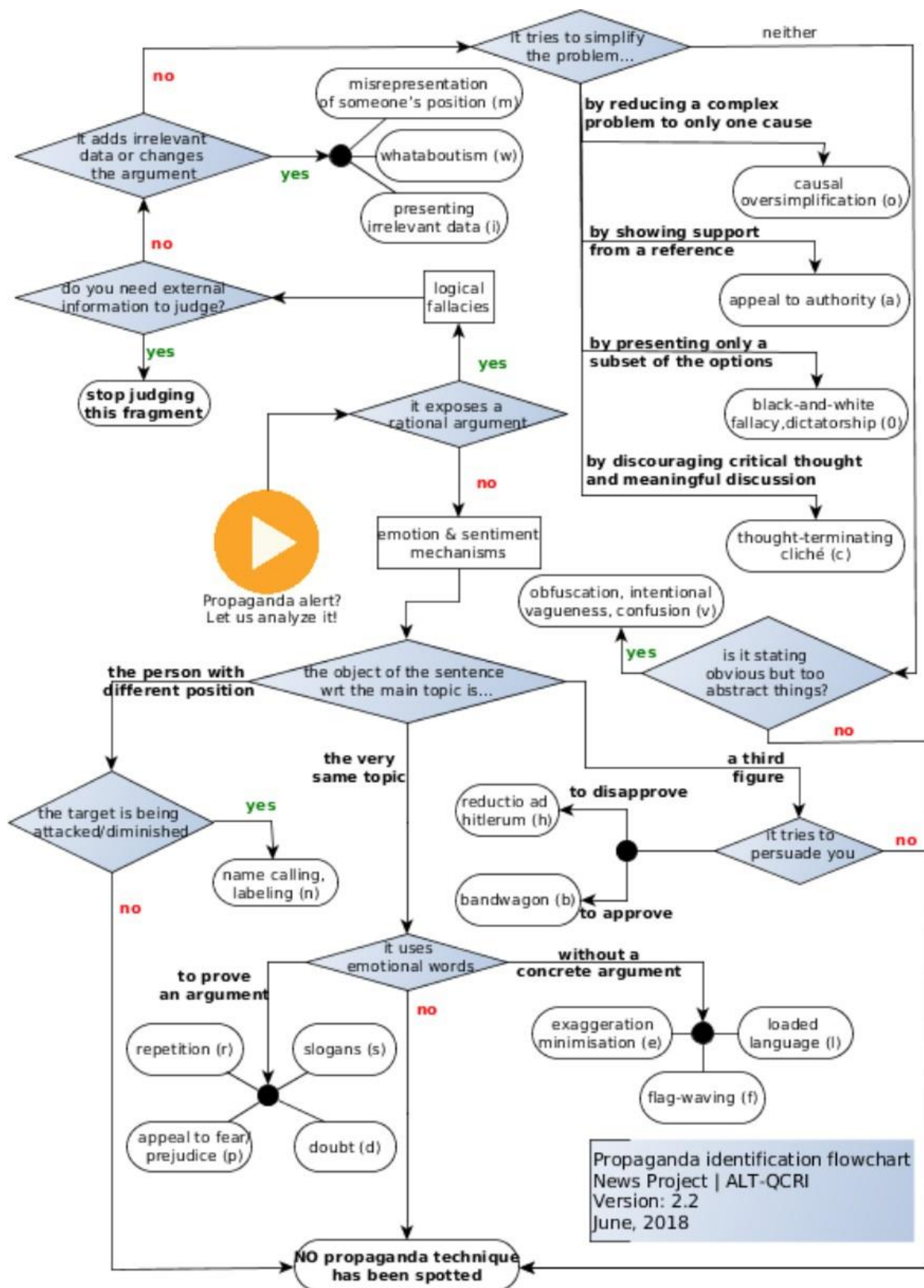


Figure 8: Annotation instructions: hierarchical diagram to guide the choice of technique.

# Definitions

## 1. Presenting Irrelevant Data (Red Herring)

Introducing irrelevant material to the issue being discussed, so that everyone's attention is diverted away from the points made.

*Example 1: In politics, defending one's own policies regarding public safety - "I have worked hard to help eliminate criminal activity. What we need is economic growth that can only come from the hands of leadership."*

*Example 2: "You may claim that the death penalty is an ineffective deterrent against crime -- but what about the victims of crime? How do you think surviving family members feel when they see the man who murdered their son kept in prison at their expense? Is it right that they should pay for their son's murderer to be fed and housed?"*

## 2. Misrepresentation of Someone's Position (Straw Man)

When an opponent's proposition is substituted with a similar one which is then refuted in place of the original proposition.

*Example: Zebedee: What is your view on the Christian God?*

*Mike: I don't believe in any gods, including the Christian one.*

*Zebedee: So you think that we are here by accident, and all this design in nature is pure chance, and the universe just created itself?*

*Mike : You got all that from me stating that I just don't believe in any gods?*

*Explanation: Mike made one claim: that he does not believe in any gods. From that, we can deduce a few things, like he is not a theist, he is not a practicing Christian, Catholic, Jew, or a member of any other religion that requires the belief in a god, but we cannot deduce that he believes we are all here by accident , nature is chance, and the universe created itself.*

### 3. Whataboutism

A technique that attempts to discredit an opponent's position by charging them with hypocrisy without directly disproving their argument.

*Example 1: a nation deflects criticism of its recent human rights violations by pointing to the history of slavery in the United States.*

*Example 2: "Qatar spending pJOfusely. on Neymar, not fighting terrorism "*

### 4. Causal Oversimplification

Assuming a single cause or reason when there are actually multiple causes for an issue.

It includes transferring blame to one person or group of without investigating the complexities of the issue

*Example 1: "President Trump has been in office for a month and gas prices have been skyrocketing. The rise in gas prices is because of President Trump."*

*Example 2: The reason New Orleans was hit so hard with the hurricane was because of all the immoral people who live there.*

*Explanation: This was an actual argument seen in the months that followed hurricane Katrina. Ignoring the validity of the claims being made, the arguer is blaming a natural disaster on a group of people.*

*Example 3: if France had not have declared war on Germany then world war two would have never happened.*

### 5. Obfuscation, Intentional vagueness, Confusion

Using words which are deliberately not clear so that the audience may have its own interpretations.

For example when an unclear phrase with multiple definitions is used within the argument and, therefore, it does not support the conclusion.

*Example: It is a good idea to listen to victims of theft. Therefore if the victims say to have the thief shot, then you should do that.*

*Explanation: the definition for "listen to" is equivocated here. In the first case it means listen to their personal account of the experience of being a victim of theft. Empathize with them. In the second case "listen to" means carry out a punishment of their choice.*

### 6. Appeal to authority

Stating that a claim is true simply because a valid authority or expert on the issue said it wa true, without any other supporting evidence offered. We consider the special case in which the reference is not an authority or an expert in this technique, although it is referred to as Testimonial in literature.



*Example: Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist and perhaps the foremost expert in the field, says that evolution is true. Therefore, it's true.*

*Explanation: Richard Dawkins certainly knows about evolution, and he can confidently tell us that it is true, but that doesn't make it true. What makes it true is the preponderance of evidence for the theory.*

*Example 2: "According to Serena Williams, our foreign policy is the best on Earth. So we are in the right direction."*

Details: since there is a chance that any authority can be wrong, it is reasonable to defer to an authority to support a claim, but the authority should not be the only justification to accept the claim, otherwise the Appeal-to-Authority fallacy is committed.

## **7. Black-and-white Fallacy, Dictatorship**

Presenting two alternative options as the only possibilities, when in fact more possibilities exist. As an extreme case, tell the audience exactly what actions to take, eliminating any other possible choices (Dictatorship).

*Example 1: You must be a Republican or Democrat. You are not a Democrat. Therefore, you must be a Republican*

*Example 2: I thought you were a good person, but you weren't at church today.*

*Explanation: The assumption here is that if one doesn't attend church, one must be bad. Of course, good people exist who don't go to church, and good church-going people could have had a really good reason not to be in church.*

*Example 3: There is no alternative to war*

## **8. Name calling or labeling**

Labeling the object of the propaganda campaign as either something the target audience fears, hates, finds undesirable or loves, praises.

*Examples: "Republican congress weasels", "Bush the Lesser" (note that lesser does not refer to "the second", but it is pejorative)*

## **9. Loaded Language**

Using specific words and phrases with strong emotional implications (either positive or negative) to influence an audience.

*Example 1: "[...] a lone lawmaker's childish shouting. "*

*Example 2: "how stupid and petty things have become in Washington"*

## 10. Exaggeration or Minimization

Either representing something in an excessive manner: making things larger, better, worse (e.g., "the best of the best", "quality guaranteed") or making something seem less important or smaller than it really is (e.g., saying that an insult was just a joke).

*Example 1: "Democrats bolted as soon as Trump's speech ended in an apparent effort to signal they can't even stomach being in the same room as the president"*

*Example 2: "We're going to have unbelievable intelligence"*

*Example 3: I was not fighting with her; we were just playing.*

## 11. Flag-waving

Playing on strong national feeling (or to any group; e.g., race, gender, political preference) to justify or promote an action or idea

*Example 1: "patriotism mean no questions" (this is also a [slogan](#))*

*Example 2: "entering this war will make us have a better future in our country."*

## 12. Doubt

Questioning the credibility of someone or something.

*Example: A candidate talks about his opponent and says: Is he ready to be the Mayor?*

## 13. Appeal to fear/prejudice

Seeking to build support for an idea by instilling anxiety and/or panic in the population towards an alternative.

In some cases the support is built based on preconceived judgements.

*Example 1: "either we go to war or we will perish" (this is also a Black and White fallacy))*

*Example 2: "we must stop those refugees as they are terrorists"*

## 14. Slogans

A brief and striking phrase that may include labeling and stereotyping. Slogans tend to act as emotional appeals.

*Example 1: "The more women at war ... the sooner we win."*

*Example 2: "Make America great again!"*

## 15. Thought-terminating cliché

Words or phrases that discourage critical thought and meaningful discussion about a given topic. They are typically short, generic sentences that offer seemingly simple answers to complex questions or that distract attention away from other lines of thought.

*Examples: It is what it is; It's just common sense; You gotta do what you gotta do; Nothing is permanent except change; Better late than never; Mind your own business; Nobody's perfect; It doesn't matter; You can't change human nature.*

## **16. Bandwagon**

Attempting to persuade the target audience to join in and take the course of action because "everyone else is taking the same action".

*Example 1: Would you vote for Clinton as president? 57% say yes Example 2: 90% of citizens support our initiative. You should.*

## **17. Reductio ad hitlerum**

Persuading an audience to disapprove an action or idea by suggesting that the idea is popular with groups hated in contempt by the target audience. It can refer to any person or concept with a negative connotation.

*Example 1: "Do you know who else was doing that ? Hitler!"*

*Example 2: "Only one kind of person can think in that way: a communist."*

## **18. Repetition**

Repeating the same message over and over again so that the audience will eventually accept it.