



# Why Does Propaganda Work? Fear-Induced Repression of the Executive Control Brain Network

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**W**e live in extraordinary times. Politicians across the globe and especially in the United States are sowing fear to gain and hold onto power: fear of other people, fear of immigrants, fear of ethnic minorities, fear of people who are gender nonconforming, fear of other countries, fear of crime, fear of loss of status, fear of the future, fear of being taken advantage of, fear of losing, and fear of disrespect. Listen for fear in the barrage of daily news stories, and you will hear it everywhere. From a psychiatric point of view, the interesting question is why does fear seem to work when it comes to propaganda?

First, we need to review our understanding about how our brains work

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through a flexible and adaptive network of functional systems. A beautiful and elegant description of brain networks can be found in the book *Networks of the Brain* by Olaf Sporns.<sup>1</sup> Functional brain networks appear to serve the functions we need to do: plan, anticipate, and think analytically (executive control network<sup>2</sup>), reflect on our inner experience (default mode network), determine what is important in our environment (salience network), and focus our attention on a task at hand (ventral attentional networks). Our networks form when doing one thing and then mostly morph into another network when we do something else. Many psychiatric disorders are associated with the inability to shift networks appropriately so people get stuck in ruminative loops, in psychosis, or in the inability to shift attention when needed.<sup>3,4</sup>

Second, we need to understand the impact of fear on networks. In an extraordinary review, data show that when participants are acutely stressed, as one might expect, their salience network becomes activated.<sup>5</sup> This makes sense because the salience network is associated with scanning the environment for threat—quite an adaptive feat so we can avoid predators. But activation of the salience network deactivates the executive control network, for example when

faced with threat, it is best to act and not think too much lest the predator eat you. But this makes it more difficult to carefully analyze information and make rational decisions. If I can make you afraid, I can suppress your ability to think straight.

If politicians can make you afraid, you should be afraid of the fear they can induce in your brain.

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