

UNDERSTANDING PROPAGANDA

A conversation with Renee Hobbs

We must teach our students to analyze the media they consume and share.

By **Rafael Heller**



RENEE HOBBS is professor of communication studies at the Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island. With her colleague Julie Coiro, she codirects the URI Graduate Certificate in Digital Literacy, a 12-credit graduate program for K-12 educators, college faculty, librarians, and media/technology professionals.

The program includes the Summer Institute in Digital Literacy, now in its ninth year. Author of 12 books and more than 150 scholarly and professional articles, she has worked in Turkey, Italy, Brazil, Germany, China, and other countries to help bring media literacy education to students and teachers worldwide. In the United States, she assisted in the development of the 2019 Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act, which was introduced by Sen. Amy Klobuchar. If passed, it would authorize \$20 million biannually to advance media literacy education in elementary and secondary schools. Hobbs received an EdD in human development from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, an M.A. in communication from the University of Michigan, and a B.A. with a double major in English literature and film/video Studies from the University of Michigan. Her most recent book is *Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age* (W.W. Norton, 2020; www.mindovermedia.us).

PHI DELTA KAPPAN: In your new book, you argue that in our “post-truth” era, it has become critically important for the nation’s schools to teach students about propaganda — that is, the use of language and media to manipulate the public’s beliefs and behaviors. But I imagine that strikes a lot of people as a strange thing to include in the K-12 curriculum. What do people think you mean when you say that schools must help students understand how propaganda works?

RENEE HOBBS: Actually, when I started offering college courses about propaganda, many years ago, a lot of students thought this meant I’d be teaching *history* classes. In most secondary schools, the only time anybody talks about propaganda is in the context of the Second World War, so students tend to associate it with the Nazi era. I often have to explain that propaganda isn’t some bygone issue from long ago and far away. Actually, it’s something we’re all swimming in every day. Yes, the posters, films, and radio broadcasts produced by the Nazis amounted to one particularly harmful example of government-sponsored propaganda. But propaganda can also be found, right now, in advertising, television news programs, public relations campaigns, Hollywood movies, and on and on. We’re all exposed to propaganda all the time.

For that matter, lots of the propaganda we’re exposed to is *beneficial* — for instance, consider public service announcements (or PSAs) that persuade us to wear seatbelts. Or consider the singing of the national anthem before ball games, which is meant to create a sense of unity. That’s another assumption I often have to challenge. People tend to think of propaganda as an evil use of the media to twist the truth and mislead the public, but it can just as easily be put to positive uses.

KAPPAN: But that raises the question: How, exactly, do you define propaganda?

HOBBS: Originally, in the 17th century, propaganda referred to the wing of the Catholic Church that was responsible for *propagating* the faith. Since then, though, it has come to refer to any use of media and communication to influence the views and behaviors of large groups of people. You might say that it's roughly equivalent to *rhetoric*, but rhetoric tends to refer to efforts to persuade individuals, while propaganda refers to mass communication.

However, the precise definition of propaganda is always changing to fit new contexts. For instance, there's a positive, post-war definition from 1946 that I love: "Propaganda is one means by which large numbers of people are induced to act together" (Smith, Lasswel, & Casey, 1946). Neil Postman's definition from the 1990s is more neutral: "Propaganda is intentionally designed communication that invites us to respond emotionally, immediately and in an either/or manner" (Postman, 1993) — I like his choice of the word "invite" because it reminds us that propaganda isn't magic; it can only work if it's responsive to the audience's hopes, fears, and dreams, and even then, it doesn't necessarily succeed. Or there's Stanley Cunningham's definition from 2002: "Propaganda is indifferent to truth and truthfulness, knowledge, and understanding; it is a form of strategic communication that uses any means to accomplish its ends" (Cunningham, 2002).

My point is that there's no one true definition of propaganda. The meaning of the term keeps evolving. So, I don't force students to memorize a particular definition of propaganda. Rather, I ask them to look at the many ways it has been defined and to come up with a definition that fits their present reality.

KAPPAN: Do young people today experience propaganda differently from previous generations?

HOBBS: Yes and no. In a sense, propaganda is timeless, in that people have always used language and images to shape the public's view of the world. But kids today live in a very different media environment from the one we grew up in. For instance, propaganda is no longer such a one-way phenomenon as it was when we were students. As a baby boomer, I had the impression that the government and corporations controlled the means of communication, such as the nightly news, TV commercials, radio, magazines, and so on. In the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, a small number of giant institutions seemed to have enormous power to tell the public what was true, influence our opinions, shape our buying habits, and so forth.

But for young people today, propaganda is much more participatory and decentered, and they're not so quick to blame big, all-powerful organizations for manipulating and misinforming them. If anything, they tend to blame *themselves* and their peers for contributing to the viral spread of propaganda by liking and sharing and posting whatever grabs their attention — especially if it's clever, or if it makes them angry — without thinking through the consequences of sharing things that aren't true.

On a positive note, though, I find that many young people are hyperaware of their responsibility to contain the spread of propaganda online. For instance, there are a lot of interesting YouTubers and podcasters who see it as their mission to help others think more critically about the content they see on the web. A couple of months ago, I interviewed a woman named Tiffany Ferguson, who's an undergraduate at New York University. She has a very popular YouTube channel — she gets over a half-million hits per week — called Internet Analysis, where she takes a phenomenon happening in social media or popular culture and carefully analyzes it, showing viewers how they're being persuaded to like a particular brand or follow an online celebrity or endorse a particular idea.

KAPPAN: So, she's taken it upon herself to provide the sort of instruction you'd like to see in the schools?

HOBBS: Right, but we can't just leave it to young people to crowdsource their own education. If we want to help students learn how to recognize and respond to the propaganda they encounter, then we need to teach it, proactively, in our classrooms. And that means weaving it into the curriculum and providing teachers with real professional support.

In my work with educators in elementary and secondary schools, I often hear teachers say that they know how to analyze the credibility of the media they grew up with — traditional journalism, the cable news, TV commercials, and so on — but they need help figuring out how to teach the many forms and genres of propaganda that have taken



"More tests? Isn't it bad to always be living in the past?"

off in recent years. When it comes to teaching about online conspiracy theories, or clickbait, or memes, or Facebook bots, or deepfakes, or social media influencers, they have no idea where to begin.

Lately, I've found that a lot of teachers are especially confused about *sponsored content* — they have a hard time grasping the fact that so much of what *looks* like legitimate news is actually paid advertising. Nor are most teachers aware of just how quickly the public relations industry has grown in recent years, even as traditional journalism and news outlets have scaled back. Right now, in the U.S., there are five people working in public relations for every full-time journalist. Most of the information you encounter in your daily life has been created by someone who has been paid to promote or discredit something rather than by someone whose job is to report things in a fair and impartial way.

KAPPAN: To many educators, the idea of teaching this subject must seem overwhelming — not just to learn about propaganda and how to teach it, but also to get up to speed on the digital evolution of propaganda. K-12 teachers are stretched too thin already. Sure, it's important for students to understand how people manipulate public opinion, but who has the time or expertise to teach this material?

HOBBS: I find it helpful to point out to teachers that many of them *already* teach propaganda and rhetoric — they just haven't been using those terms. Every year, for instance, 7th-grade teachers all over the U.S. assign their students to create a public service announcement, usually about alcohol or tobacco use. Or maybe they ask students to write a persuasive book report, with help from the school librarian. Those are classic middle-grades assignments. So, teachers are, in fact, providing instruction in how to persuade, how to craft messages, how to combine words and images to move audiences, and how to analyze such communication strategies.

In fact, I've been able to find a lot of terrific classroom activities, from every subject area and grade level, to help teachers see what it means to provide explicit instruction in propaganda and rhetoric. In the book, I've shared 50 or 60 examples. For instance, a high school science teacher shared a lesson plan on the climate change debate, inviting students to analyze how corporations and activists have tried to spin the science. An elementary school teacher shared how she uses Mo Willems' book *The Pigeon Wants a Puppy* to get students to discuss the persuasive tactics people use to get what they want. Another teacher gets students thinking about propaganda techniques used in *The Hunger Games* and the Harry Potter books.

So, if teachers want to teach about propaganda, there are plenty of examples to help them get started. The challenge, though, is to help teachers move beyond one-off assignments and begin to teach these things more systematically, providing explicit instruction about what persuasion is, how to get people to pay attention to your message, what techniques people use to change public beliefs and behaviors, how they're using the newest media tools to do this, and so on.

To be honest, we just don't know how many teachers are currently offering this sort of serious, ongoing instruction about persuasion and propaganda. I don't know that anybody has surveyed teachers on this topic, for instance. Given what I hear when

I meet with educators and attend conferences and talk with other researchers, though, my sense is that that fewer teachers do so today than in past decades. For instance, it used to be pretty common for middle and high school English teachers to teach a whole unit on propaganda, having students analyze books like *Animal Farm* and *1984*. But I've heard from a lot of teachers, especially older ones, that they just don't teach those anymore.

KAPPAN: Why is that?

HOBBS: That's the \$100,000 question. The best answer I've found comes from a recent article by David Fleming (2019), an English professor at the University of Massachusetts, titled "Fear of persuasion in the English language arts." From the ancient Greeks, we get the idea that if you want to win over an audience, you can't just tell them what to think. If you want to communicate effectively, you should appeal to their emotions, their respect for you, *and* their logical reasoning — that's the familiar rhetorical triangle of *pathos*, *ethos*, and *logos*. In the real world, this is how people actually *use* language. The best writers, PR executives, and politicians are successful because they're flexible and strategic, adapting their emotions, style, and logic to the particular audience. And the people we think of as the nation's most powerful and persuasive speakers and writers — Jefferson, Lincoln, Harriet Beecher Stowe, MLK — were taught this way.

In U.S. schools, we've always had some teachers who've understood this, and who've taught their students both to write persuasively and to recognize how other people are trying to persuade them. Fleming explains, though, that American education has mostly bought into the idea that there's a single, *correct* way to write, that good writing is logical and dry, and that it's wrong to try to win people to your side by using an attractive style or manipulating their emotions. And that's the kind of thinking that gave us the Common Core standards, which told English language arts

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teachers to focus only on fact- and evidence-based argumentative writing, and to say nothing about other means of persuading people. The Common Core put all the attention on *logos*, kicking *pathos* and *ethos* to the gutter.

So, Fleming argues — and I think he's right — that the Common Core and the high-stakes testing industry deserve a lot of blame for squeezing out whatever efforts schools were making to teach young people how to analyze propaganda and write persuasively. There's just not much room in the Common Core for anything but logical argumentation.

KAPPAN: As a lapsed researcher in this area, I know there's been a huge effort, over the last few decades, to recover this hidden history of literacy instruction in the U.S., both in and out of schools. Like Fleming says, most students, in most schools, have been made to churn out bland five-paragraph essays and told to write in the passive voice, with no personality or style. But at various times over the last century, we've also had flourishing debate societies, creative writing programs, book clubs, teacher networks like the National Writing Project, and local groups of teachers who were committed to teaching persuasive writing. Were there similar efforts, in the past, to teach about propaganda?

HOBBS: Absolutely, and it's a fascinating history that goes back to the work of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in the 1930s. At that point, a lot of scholars were interested in studying the impact of film and other emerging media. Radio was the big thing in those days, so the Rockefeller Foundation funded a lot of researchers, especially at Columbia University, to study the influence of radio broadcasting on public opinion, and that's more or less how the fields of mass communication and media studies got started.

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One of the first big radio celebrities was Father Coughlin, who had a weekly broadcast that reached something like 30 million people, and during the 1930s his broadcasts became intensely anti-Semitic and pro-Fascist. In 1937, the businessman Edward Filene — who owned Filene's department store in Boston — became so worried about this that he decided to donate a million dollars to Columbia to create a research center to study this sort of mass propaganda. And that's when a million dollars was a lot of money. So, that

became the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, which was run by a journalist named Clyde Miller, who'd been teaching at Columbia and doing research on public relations.

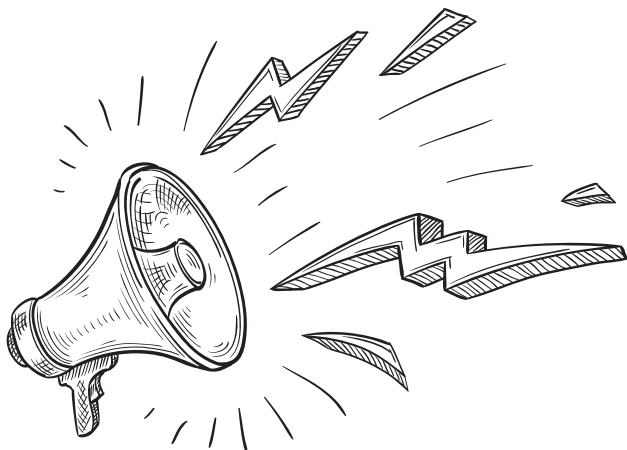
One of the first things Miller did was to reach out to high school English teachers to help create a monthly magazine called *Propaganda Analysis*, which Miller sent to high schools and libraries across the country. The goal was to translate ancient Greek and Roman ideas about rhetoric into snappy, accessible language, in order to educate Americans about the sorts of propaganda being spread by people like Coughlin, Hitler, and Mussolini. That's how a lot of baby boomers like me learned about concepts like “flag waving,” “glittering generalities,” and “jumping on the bandwagon” — those were terms that Miller and his team came up with to help us analyze persuasive strategies in the mass media.

KAPPAN: How long did that work go on?

HOBBS: In 1941, the U.S. entered the Second World War, and all of a sudden, our government was in the propaganda business, trying to persuade Americans to join the war effort and unite against the enemy. And if it was our elected officials doing the flag-waving and persuading citizens to jump on the bandwagon, then it seemed unpatriotic to keep teaching students how to be skeptical of that sort of persuasion. So that put a stop to the work of the Institute.

It had a second life, though, beginning right after the war. The U.S. Defense Department took the *Propaganda Analysis* curriculum and used it to teach veterans how to resist disinformation from the Soviets. And at the same time, the American Historical Association created a pamphlet that it sent to public school teachers, explaining how they could teach about propaganda. Given how widely these materials circulated around the country, it seems likely that students were taught a lot more about propaganda in the 1940s and '50s than they are today.

Propaganda Analysis also informed the media literacy movement that took off in the 1960s, when there was a surge



of concern about television and its influence on children. For instance, the National Parent Teacher Association made this a priority, urging schools to implement a curriculum developed by psychologists at Yale, which focused on “critical viewing skills.” The idea was that young children should learn about how TV shows and commercials are created, how they persuade viewers to buy products, how they try to shape your identity, how they oversimplify complicated issues, and so on. So, in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, a lot of the nation’s students were taught to analyze the propaganda they saw on television. Ultimately, that led a number of states to begin incorporating media literacy into their K-12 standards. That happened in Massachusetts, Texas, Florida, California... and then, in 1990, one of the big language arts textbooks — published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston — included material on media literacy for the first time.

Basically, then, we had a pretty healthy, long-standing movement in the public schools to teach students about propaganda. It started in the ’30s, paused during the war, picked up again in the ’50s, and then evolved into the media studies movement in the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s. The high point was probably in the 1990s, when we saw an explosion of curriculum materials and resources and conferences focusing on how to teach students to be critical consumers of media. And then the energy began to wane. I don’t want to put *too* much blame on the Common Core, but that did help suck the life out of the movement. The new standards just didn’t put any emphasis on teaching students about persuasion and propaganda.

KAPPAN: What would you say to teachers who are concerned about the current media landscape — all the conspiracy theories, faked images, partisan message boards, and so on — and want to teach their students how to analyze propaganda, but who worry that if they do so, they’ll trigger a backlash from parents and community members?

HOBBS: I just did a workshop with teachers in Minnesota, and, in fact, they said that was their biggest fear. Their communities are incredibly polarized, they know that many parents hold political beliefs that are very different from their own, and they’re afraid to assign topics that will set off a conflict.

But as I explain in my book, you can teach this material effectively without bringing highly charged content into the classroom. In 2015, I created a resource called the Mind over Media Propaganda Gallery. It’s a site where anybody can upload examples of the propaganda they see in their daily lives. Sometimes people upload highly partisan content — a commercial for a political candidate, say — but a lot of the material isn’t so controversial, and it’s not likely to antagonize parents, which means teachers can browse the site and find relatively safe examples of propaganda to analyze and discuss in the classroom.

However, if you do feel comfortable letting students analyze a wide range of content, then there’s an activity I

like to assign: I’ll ask students to browse the gallery and choose one piece of propaganda that they would feel comfortable sharing on their social media feed, and one piece of propaganda that they would never, ever share. That always gets a great classroom discussion going about what counts as harmful propaganda, what’s beneficial, and what ethical principles should guide our decisions about creating and sharing content. Also, it encourages students to look at a lot of different examples of propaganda, which helps them see that it can be found in all sorts of places, from journalism and advertising to politics, entertainment, education, activism, popular culture, and so on. For a 15-year-old, this can be a transformative experience, opening their eyes to the need to be cautious about the media you consume and the information you take in.

KAPPAN: Looking ahead, are you optimistic that more teachers and schools will come back to teaching media literacy and propaganda analysis?

HOBBS: I am. I think a lot of educators are demanding it. In 2019, for instance, the National Council of Teachers of English passed a resolution calling for a renewed emphasis on teaching “civic and critical literacy,” including efforts to “enable students to analyze and evaluate sophisticated persuasive techniques in all texts, genres, and types of media” and to “support classroom practices that examine and question uses of language in order to discern inhumane, misinformative, or dishonest discourse and arguments.” Well, that sounds like propaganda analysis to me.

Plus, I think we’re seeing a lot of young people becoming more eager than they have in years to embrace civic life — whether they’re interested in politics, racial justice, the environment, you name it. And to participate in civic life effectively, they need to be able to speak persuasively, activate emotions, simplify information, appeal to people’s deepest values, respond to attacks from opponents, and so on. In short, they need to learn about rhetoric and propaganda. So, our students are certainly ready for this kind of instruction, and they may begin to demand it, too. ■

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