29. Beyond the smear word: media literacy educators tackle contemporary propaganda
Renee Hobbs

INTRODUCTION

The term 'fake news' brought public attention and interest to the disinformation and misinformation that is spread by politicians, bad actors, bots, and trolls. Widespread concerns have mounted about the dangers of our polluted and poisoned information ecosystem. It is a common refrain of politicians and thought leaders alike: the digital landscape is now a treacherous place that has been damaged by Silicon Valley's technologies, as people now spread poison through social media, moving it up the chain to infect mainstream media and make bad ideas seem believable. Moreover, political demagogues have exploited the digital media ecosystem to inspire their followers to incite violence against governments (Russonello, 2021).

Academics from many fields and disciplines have raced to examine this dangerous new world. Intentionally choosing not to use the word 'propaganda', Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakshan coined a new term, 'malinformation', to describe information that is not false or inaccurate, but that is shared specifically to cause harm, as when someone uses a picture of a dead child refugee in an effort to ignite hatred of a particular ethnic group. Phillips and Milner (2021) use the term 'polluted information' to describe how lies and falsehoods exert substantial damage to the information ecosystem. They claim that, with the convergence of technological and economic efficiencies, poison spews from digital platforms that aim to maximise user engagement. Even traditional mainstream news publications contribute to the pollution by their increasingly partisan stance, structuring content in pursuit of the clicks, likes, and shares that are their primary source of revenue. Plus, users themselves are not merely victims of this poison: they create it themselves. Dramatic language is often used to frame the severity of this problem, as in this sample sentence: 'The crash and thunder of attack after attack, hoax after hoax, manipulation after manipulation has wrought a media landscape so inundated that it can be difficult to distinguish what's true from what's trash' (Phillips and Milner, 2021: 1).

Such hyperbolic language might seem justified by both the volume and diversity of online misinformation and manipulation. While the public is free to tune out the madness of Trump tweets, journalists and academics cannot, and for some the barrage has been emotionally exhausting. Many politicians, journalists, and academics who followed the President's Twitter account experienced feelings of anger, rage, hopelessness, and despair as Trump and his enablers peddled false narratives about Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III's investigation, the tariffs on China, legislative gridlock, and much more (Lithwick, 2019). The range and diversity of harmful propaganda included: organised disinformation campaigns waged through decentralised and distributed networks (Benkler et al., 2018); right-wing nationalists and white supremacists eager to bring their ideas into the mainstream (Marantz, 2019); disguised information that appeared to derive from within a target population, who were actually unaware of the manipulation (US District Court, 2018); bots and trolls that amplified

nationalist extremism (Woolley and Howard, 2018); and authoritarian governments around the world who ramped up censorship, removing critical voices and using surveillance to monitor the actions of political dissidents (Bastos and Farkas, 2019). Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that academics and journalists took up the metaphor of the poisoned information ecosystem with such enthusiasm. It captured a sense of the ubiquitous phenomenon they were trying to understand.

However, the discourse norms of contemporary journalism, with its own need to generate clicks through likes and shares, may not serve the needs of educators who are faced with the challenge of preparing students to thrive in a time of increased political polarisation, where distrust and apathy form a toxic stew, and where the adolescent pleasures of transgressive trolling, the 'allure of the lulz' (Mina, 2019) lead many young people to act like Josh Hall, a 21-year-old food delivery driver. Over the course of a single year, he impersonated members of the Trump family on Twitter and gained a large following of supporters by hosting fake fundraising events, mixing raunchy political commentary with wild conspiracy theories. Hall claims he was 'just trying to rally up MAGA [Make America Great Again] supports and have fun' (Nicas, 2020: 1). As educators in the United States and around the world explore strategies that may help young people understand both the power and the social responsibilities of life online, the concept of propaganda proves to be supremely useful in examining the emotional power of digital media as a strategic tool of social influence.

In this chapter, I first examine some primary reasons why propaganda education is not a more substantive part of elementary and secondary education, by looking closely at the rise of the Common Core State Standards for English language arts and the impact of growing political polarization on the work of social studies educators. Then I report on a global initiative in which I participated, working with educators in both the United States and Europe with initial support from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and later from the Evens Foundation and the European Commission. Working with a group of international media literacy educators, we took up the challenge of integrating the study of contemporary propaganda into the practice of media literacy education, targeting high school students and their teachers. The most significant benefit of this work helped to demonstrate the value of contemporary propaganda in the classroom as it cultivates appreciation for nuance and multi-perspectival thinking in the process of activating intellectual curiosity.

As I will show, the dialectic between protection and empowerment stances, which is a long-standing feature of media literacy education, propels educators to teach about propaganda in ways that emphasises benefits as well as its harms. Although media literacy educators fear the unpredictability of teaching about harmful propaganda in an increasingly polarised world, they also recognise the value of conceptualising propaganda more broadly to acknowledge it as 'one means by which large numbers of people are induced to act together' (Smith and Lasswell, 1945: 2). The study of propaganda provides opportunities to reflect on how the meaning-making process is situational and contextual, how the ancient Greek philosophers' ideas of persuading with *logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*, and *kairos* is still relevant today, even when applied to memes, sponsored content, partisan news, and eyewitness protest videos posted to YouTube.

THE EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE TO FAKE NEWS AND PROPAGANDA

How did educators respond to the rise of the so-called fake news crisis? In general, if they tackled it at all, librarians and educators placed their efforts on activating cognition and critical thinking to help learners recognise and evaluate problematic news and information (Burkhardt, 2017). With the blessing and support of journalists and with support from journalism philanthropies, some educators and librarians began to teach students to evaluate credible information sources, explaining how journalists verify information to determine its truth value, with the goal of increasing trust in mainstream media (Ashley, 2019). Others engaged students in creating school news media, to better understand how journalism is constructed (Hall et al., 2015). Still other educators emphasised to their students the value of civic action, using an approach called youth participatory politics, where students were engaged in social change initiatives by making creative work that explicitly responds to the needs of a community and addresses civic and political goals (Kahne et al., 2015). In helping students to create positive propaganda in the form of public service announcements and social issue advocacy documentaries, some classroom teachers have emphasised that such forms of expression are essential to the practice of democratic self-governance (Selfe and Selfe, 2008).

At the college level, some media literacy educators adopted an approach that examines the relationship between the Internet and democracy in the age of fake news, filter bubbles, and Facebook security breaches, explaining to students how the democratising potential of the Internet has been radically compromised by the logic of capitalism and the unaccountable power of a handful of telecom and tech monopolies (Jhally, 2018). In helping college students to analyse news, the function of news as propaganda is sometimes examined. For a generation of college students, the work of Herman and Chomsky (1989) supported the careful examination of news by showing how the political economy of journalism and the routines and norms of the press uphold the power of big business and big government. Unlike the traditional story that gets told in American public (that is, non-private) schools (that is, the idea that mass media upholds the practice of self-governance in a democratic society), Herman and Chomsky offered an alternative view, claiming that the function of the mass media is to deeply inculcate people into social roles that support the existing institutional power structures of the society.

However, for those working in K-12 (kindergarten to 12th grade) public education it was not so easy to explore these ideologically rich topics in the school classroom. It is often difficult for teachers (who, after all, are agents of the state) to interrogate news, current events, political campaigns, and contemporary propaganda in the classroom (Mason et al., 2018).

Well-meaning efforts to label the diverse forms of expression students experience each day with terms such as 'malinformation' or 'pollution' does little to advance learning goals. In a society less trustworthy of media institutions (Bowyer and Kahne, 2016) media literacy educators have long recognised the dangers of inadvertent indoctrination, where the teacher offers activities strategically designed to inculcate the teacher's own world view and values. They know that teaching students how to critically read media does not automatically increase trust in news. Research by Mihailidis (2009) found that by focusing media literacy on critical skills alone, college students were prone to be more cynical, less willing to engage in dialogue, and less trustful of media and institutions in the first place. Learning to use labels such as 'malinformation' and 'information pollution' may promote cynicism or even actively interfere with

critical thinking if learners merely use such labels to call out content they dislike as a means to buttress pre-existing views.

Moreover, young people may feel the increased need to join in what Mihailidis and Viotty (2017: 443) call the 'spreadable spectacle'. Today propaganda is spread more by viral sharing than by its one-way transmission by governments or corporations. Growing up in a partisan age, students may feel that keeping up with current events is mostly a matter of finding and sharing news that aligns with existing beliefs and values. News content can be easily judged from an egocentric approach where content that supports existing beliefs is prioritised. Such a practice has the added benefit of conveying aspects of personal identity to one's peer group. For this reason, Mihailidis and Viotty (2017: 450) wonder: 'Perhaps the US electorate is not "ill-informed" so much as they would rather find information that fits their worldview. If finding truth is not as large a priority as finding personally relevant information, then what good is knowing how to critique a message in the first place?'

Another challenge to teaching about propaganda in the K-12 classroom is people's general repugnance when encountering the word itself. In a 1979 essay, Neil Postman once noticed that because propaganda is a 'smear word', educators may feel little need to examine it. Some academic experts like to restrict the use of the term 'propaganda' to refer only to efforts by state actors such as the Russian or Chinese governments. Gentler terms such as 'strategic communication', 'public diplomacy' (Cull, 2013), 'public relations' (Bernays, 1928) or 'activism' (Gelders and Ihlen, 2010) are used to describe propaganda that is close to home. In analysing the historical trajectory of public diplomacy, Cull (2013: 143) explained:

> It was certainly convenient for US information work to be able to reserve the term propaganda for the works of the enemy and to embrace a new benign term for its own democratic practice. Yet the extent to which public diplomacy was different from propaganda was seldom emphasized on Capitol Hill.

While state-supported propaganda has continued to be a substantial feature of contemporary propaganda, it is also produced by a variety of actors, not just states or would-be states. Now anyone, from anywhere, can influence public opinion by leveraging social media in ways that compel attention from television networks, newspapers of record, and leading online news sources. Sponsored content, memes, videos, vlogs, and social media posts may all function as propaganda. One scholar puts it this way: 'One person's activism – or education, or journalism, for that matter – is another person's propaganda' (Jack, 2017: 1).

Perhaps the most important reason why a more neutral, less negative definition of propaganda is valuable is because it expresses the strategic practice of communication as a form of social influence, as a means to achieve social power (Ellul, 1973). Definitions of propaganda are situational and contextual, responding to changes in society and culture (Hobbs, 2020). Educators and scholars often call upon history to defend a more neutral framing of the term. When propaganda is understood 'as a central means of organizing and shaping thought and perception', it is typical to call upon the modern origins of the term, which go back at least to the spread of religious doctrine during the European Counter Reformation (Auerbach and Castronovo, 2013: 2). Seen this way, propaganda functions a form of social glue that binds people to each other.

Because we are attracted to propaganda that aligns with our pre-existing beliefs and values, we might not recognise unifying propaganda that takes the form of aphorisms or truisms about democracy. When propaganda takes the form of inspirational, patriotic ditties or even protest

songs, it may go unnoticed. Today, public service announcements may proclaim 'Love has no labels' to advance social values of equality and freedom, or warn you to wear a mask and wash your hands to avoid coronavirus infection. By activating strong emotion, simplifying information, and appealing to the audience's hopes, fears, and dreams, propaganda helps influence the public mind.

However, when the term is only used as a smear word to criticise messages we dislike, people may develop a blind spot in recognising and respecting forms of propaganda designed to build consensus. Because propaganda activates both negative emotions (such as hatred, fear, and envy) and more positive feelings (such as pleasure, joy, belonging, and pride), it may offer comfort from the chaos of information overload (Lippmann, 1922 [1997]). For educators, there is also practical value to conceptualising propaganda as potentially either beneficial or harmful. It not only aligns with teachers' mandate to bring quality information sources into the classroom, but also it may sensitise learners to the use of propaganda by activists and change agents, who take epistemic responsibility for their responsible use of language, images and symbols in adopting an identity as a 'positive propagandist'.

THE STUDY OF PROPAGANDA GENRES IN AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The analysis and production of propaganda is part of public education in the United States and around the world, but it is not a common or well-recognised practice (Hobbs, 2020). There are at least two primary reasons why propaganda education is not a more substantive part of elementary and secondary education. The study of propaganda has been largely abandoned by English teachers as the Common Core State Standards placed exclusive emphasis on informational texts, and social studies teachers, who have long struggled with teaching controversial issues, have found that the increase political polarisation in the community makes teaching propaganda genres risky. Because the term by some is used as a synonym for 'bad', many teachers hear the word 'propaganda' and have a knee-jerk reaction to it, believing that it should have little or no role in the classroom.

A short history of teaching about propaganda reveals that although the topic makes some teachers uncomfortable, at times it has also inspired them to action. In the 1930s, teachers who were concerned about the rise of anti-Semitism and the increasing role of radio and movies found a champion in Clyde Miller, a journalist who worked at Columbia University. With philanthropic funding from Boston business leader Edward Filene, Miller launched the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA), a short-lived but influential initiative in propaganda education. Its monthly publication was distributed to thousands of high schools and public libraries, and the list of rhetorical devices it developed is still used in American public schools today to analyse propaganda. If American students get any opportunity at all to examine propaganda in schools, it is most likely that they will be encouraged to use labels to identify propaganda techniques, with terms such as 'glittering generalities', 'bandwagon', and 'card stacking' (Hobbs and McGee, 2014).

Miller's team explicitly framed propaganda education as an antidote to being victimised by a presumably powerful and manipulative persuader (Miller, 1941). Teachers were encouraged to use examples of contemporary propaganda in the classroom, leading students through a process of critical thinking about the messages used to shape and influence public opinion.

IPA documents argue that awareness of these devices 'keeps us from having our thought processes blocked by a trick', keeping people from being fooled or manipulated (Miller and Edwards, 1936: 24).

However, repeated use of the word 'trick' in IPA publications does not align with the wisdom of the ancient rhetoricians. Suggesting that the rhetorical tools themselves are somehow inherently immoral or unethical practices of communication is itself a propaganda ploy (Hobbs and McGee, 2014). Given the dangerous rise of fascism in Europe, the use of this strategy was to be expected. However, it does not seem consistent with classic articulations of propaganda as rhetoric, where strategies used may be beneficial or harmful depending on the context and motives of the communicator (Cunningham, 2002).

Propaganda education continued in the 1970s as media literacy educators developed a new paradigm for the critical analysis of popular culture. At that time, rising levels of concern about the influence of television on children led to the creation of 'critical viewing skills education', a term used to define media literacy education by focusing exclusively on analysing media. The publication of *Media&Values* magazine by the Los Angeles-based Center for Media Literacy accelerated interest in media literacy across the country (RobbGrieco, 2018). By the 1990s, there was some considerable enthusiasm for integrating critical analysis of contemporary mass media and popular culture into the curriculum, as a national membership organisation formed to support it. During the 1980s and into the 1990s, this grass-roots group accelerated its focus on integrating media literacy education into the curriculum, and it began to be included in state education standards in Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Texas, and many other states. Public interest in '21st century skills' was also instrumental in furthering the placement of media literacy training on state standards (Thoman and Jolls, 2004).

Among educational leaders in states such as Texas, media literacy was seen as a new and technologically relevant set of competencies that are essential to keeping abreast of media and technological developments (Ward-Barnes, 2010). Instructional practices include examining how meaning is conveyed through visual representations by interpreting maps, charts, and even video segments. Students were also required to create and produce visual images to convey meaning using technology and media. Students compared and contrasted visual, print, electronic media and written stories in books, graphic art, illustration, and photojournalism.

By 1994, widespread support for education reform intensified and the US Congress passed legislation entitled the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which allowed the federal government to financially contribute to the states' curriculum and standards planning processes. In Texas, this effort resulted in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) in 1995, a set of standards that was created with significant input from Texas educators, scholars, experts, and members of the public. Texas educators adapted, with modifications, the media literacy concepts that other states had created, and emphasised the importance of making education relevant to contemporary society by articulating what each student should know and be able to do in the digital age (Ward-Barnes, 2010).

By 2009, however, the work of educators in the states gave sway to a much more centralised effort by state leaders to shape the American curriculum. Governors and state commissioners of education coordinated this effort through the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), this work had a transformational impact on American public education. In English language arts, media literacy (which had been called 'viewing and representing' in some states) virtually disappeared from the education standards and in its

place was a strong emphasis on 'the special place of argument'. Although the architect of the CCSS state standards has stated that students must learn to read complicated texts of all sorts, English teachers shifted their focus towards informational texts and omitted persuasive forms completely (Redmond, 2015).

Thus, the study of propaganda in American secondary schools fell off the map. In a compelling historical and critical analysis which traces the 'fear of persuasion' in English language arts education, Fleming (2019) explains that the CCSS near-exclusive focus on argumentation led writing and composition scholars to ignore persuasive genres, creating an 'explicit bias' against persuasive genres (Fleming, 2019: 522). Functioning as a de facto national curriculum, the CCSS set forward a binary opposition between persuasion and argumentation, substantially misrepresenting the 2000-year-old history of rhetorical scholarship.

In analysing examples of lesson plans and typical K-12 classroom practices in English language arts, Fleming shows how the rhetorical triangle of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* was turned into a simple hierarchy. He offers evidence to show the many substantial ways in which English language arts educators have privileged *logos* over *pathos* and *ethos*, claiming that a generation of educators has been taught to position argumentation as uniquely 'truth seeking' and thus superior to persuasion, which uses 'mere emotion' and appeals to character as a (presumably unethical) form of influence. As a result, persuasive genres have been nearly banished from K-12 schools in English language arts (Fleming, 2019: 522).

Fear of persuasion has had a deadly impact on American public education beyond the English classroom. There is a long and well-established scholarly literature showing how American social studies teachers lack confidence to, or choose not to, teach about controversial issues on topics including gun control, abortion, immigration, systemic racism, climate change, and more (Hess, 2004). Though schools have long been understood as important sites of civic learning, the relationship between students, teachers, public schools, and their communities is inherently political. When there is heightened political polarisation, the challenge of engaging young people in controversial issues becomes even more precarious (Hess and McAvoy, 2015).

When educators feel like their own political views differ from those of the community and parents, they may be less likely to engage in learning activities about controversial issues. In some communities, talking about elections in school can create tension between parents and school leaders. Teachers may get clear signals from their school leaders, who may suggest that students have their political discussions at home. During the presidential election of 2016, a study published in the *American Educational Research Journal* found that many teachers wanted to talk with students about the election and related issues but were also afraid of backlash. Many felt they should not, or could not, share their political affiliations or feelings due to the idea of maintaining political neutrality in the classroom (Dunn et al., 2019).

In Geller's (2020) study of social studies teachers, the vast majority described making efforts to not reveal their personal political beliefs and opinions, a stance they viewed as politically balanced. For teachers, this often meant ensuring representation of both sides of issues by playing devil's advocate or articulating the views of the 'other side'. Sometimes it meant providing materials or multiple sources that would be seen as representing a variety of viewpoints. But even innocuous practice can be controversial in some communities. One teacher described how, in his conservative area of Tennessee, a school librarian put up a sticker that used symbols from world religions to spell out 'COEXIST' and that some students complained that it was discriminatory toward their Christian beliefs.

In a 2016 survey by the Southern Poverty Law Center of more than 10 000 teachers, coun-sellors, and school administrators, 90 per cent reported that school climate was negatively affected by heightened anxiety immediately after the election of President Donald Trump, especially from marginalised students, including immigrants, Muslims, African Americans, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. Participants reported derogatory language directed at these students, and students were targeting each other based on which candidate they had supported. Thousands of educators described specific incidents of bigotry and harassment that were inspired by election rhetoric, with swastika graffiti, assaults on students and teachers, property damage, fights, and threats of violence, among the most com-monly reported (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). While some educators felt helpless and hopeless, others were fully aware that they simply lacked a solid understanding of what should be taught or learned.

The coronavirus pandemic, with its accompanying array of misinformation, malinforma-tion, conspiracy theories, and propaganda, created new stresses with the shift to remote emer-gency instruction. In making the transition to online learning, teachers recognised that some of their students were experiencing trauma. It could take the form of arguing, refusing to work, communicating in verbally aggressive ways, or bickering with parents in the background during during Zoom class meetings when students learned at home. The absence of students as they withdrew from schoolwork was another unhealthy coping pattern (Pickens, 2020). As election season approached, teachers voiced concerns that learning about the presidential election campaign could be challenging for both students and teachers. Some teachers made the decision to avoid the topic, because they experienced events both at home and at school that led them to believe that talk about the elections would simply be unproductive. Many felt they should not, or could not, share their political affiliations or feelings, due to the idea of maintaining political neutrality in the classroom (Hobbs, 2020).

As my sympathy for secondary educators who struggled with these challenges increased, I was fortunate to have an opportunity work with American social studies and English teach-ers with an interest in teaching propaganda as part of a consultancy with the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum beginning in 2007. In the next section, I describe how the experience of working with media literacy educators led to a deeper appreciation of the impor-tance of teaching about propaganda in ways that acknowledge its variety of forms, including news and journalism, advertising and public relations, government and politics, activism, entertainment, and education. Eventually the fruits of this work functioned to reshape my understanding of the value of a truly global propaganda education, framed as both empower-ment and protection, as a means to cultivate multi-perspectival thinking and respect for diverse interpretations.

IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: PROPAGANDA EDUCATION GOES GLOBAL

In 2007, the museum exhibition 'The State of Deception', curated by Stephen Luckert of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, examined propaganda in the Third Reich, demonstrating the variety of sophisticated techniques used by the Nazi Party to sway millions of Germans and other Europeans 'with appealing ideas of a utopian world along with frightful images of enemies it deemed threats to those dreams' (USHMM, 2007). The exhibit showed

the use of propaganda as an essential part of the political process in Germany's young democracy. Then it illustrated how propaganda was used to implement radical programmes under the Third Reich dictatorship, with examples of propaganda in education, entertainment, news and journalism, and all aspects of cultural life. Filled with original artifacts, short videos, and compelling interactive multimedia exhibits, museum patrons also learned how propaganda was used to justify war and mass murder by dehumanising Jews and other people, and by representing territorial expansion as a form of self-defence (Luckert and Bachrach, 2007).

I was engaged to work as a consultant for the initiative to help the museum build connections between past and present in its education outreach initiative. Museum educators realised that, in helping people to recognise and understand propaganda, their efforts were a form of media literacy education (Wasserman, 2017). In collaboration with the education staff, we developed and implemented a variety of outreach programmes for teachers, students, journalists, and public policy leaders. As part of this work, there were many opportunities to talk about historical and contemporary propaganda with many people across the country. The deep negative connotations of the word 'propaganda' in relation to the Third Reich clearly seemed to limit people's thinking about forms of contemporary propaganda that people encounter every day. As we met with journalists as well as high school and college educators in Philadelphia, St Louis, Washington, DC, and Chicago, I gained a deeper appreciation of the many challenges of examining connections between historical and contemporary propaganda.

When the Brussels-based organisation Media and Learning asked me to offer a two-day masterclass on teaching propaganda in March 2016, I got the chance to engage with some of the leading media literacy experts in Europe. In discussing and debating various strategies for teaching about the new forms of media that people encounter as part of daily media use, we considered the importance of critically analysing memes, sponsored content, clickbait, pseudoscience, hoaxes, satire, partisan news, viral videos, and more. But the rise of public apathy, disengagement, and political polarisation were recognised as substantial challenges to the future of democracy in Europe and around the world. We wondered: could an approach to media literacy focused on propaganda education address concerns about terrorism, migration and immigration, Islamophobia, radicalisation, and populist and extremist forms of nationalism? What ideas, lesson plans, and digital education resources and tools could help support the development of learners' critical thinking skills in ways that promote tolerance, increase intellectual curiosity, and build appreciation of diverse perspectives and interpretations?

At the same time as our discussions were under way, concerns about so-called 'fake news' emerged after the inauguration of President Donald Trump, when White House officials presented 'alternative facts' about the size of the inauguration crowd. Thanks to support from public affairs professionals in the United States (US) State Department, I gave workshops and interacted with international journalists and educators in Brazil, Germany, and Italy. Working in collaboration with Professor Silke Grafe at the University of Wurzberg, and with support from the US State Department, we offered workshops to German high school teachers in four cities that focused on contemporary propaganda. We also used a virtual exchange programme to connect students from Germany and the United States to actively construct knowledge about contemporary propaganda. Students watched and annotated digital videos, and engaged in synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences, which helped them analyse and evaluate the emotional appeals of propaganda and the accuracy of the information contained in it. Through cross-cultural interaction, students gained sensitivity to the idea that people interpret media messages differently, using their prior knowledge and cultural context as a guide.

Researchers found that in evaluating the potential benefits and/or harms of contemporary propaganda, students use information outside the text to inform their judgement (Hobbs et al., 2018).

In more than 40 meetings with media literacy educators in Romania, Croatia, Belgium, Italy, Poland, Germany, Japan, Finland, and Brazil over four years, much was learned about how to teach today's students about propaganda, advertising, public relations, social media, and activism as forms of contemporary propaganda that shape public discourse and public life (Hobbs, 2020). With support from the Evens Foundation and a grant from the European Commission, a team of European and American educators took up the challenge of integrating the study of contemporary propaganda into the practice of media literacy education, targeting middle school and high school students and their teachers. The Mind Over Media educational website was adapted with support and collaboration from educators in France, Finland, Belgium, Romania, Croatia, and Poland. We expanded the educational platform (www.propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com) that uses crowdsourcing to provide a continually fresh gallery of new examples of global propaganda that are part of our global culture today. In interacting on the website, learners review and upload examples of propaganda and discuss the potential benefits and harms. In this work, we developed a unified and coherent approach to cultural adaptation of curriculum materials; mapped learning outcomes to national standards; developed teacher education training protocols to support the use of the Mind Over Media propaganda gallery; and documented our local outreach work on a blog.

Educators in each country do not all share the exact same values and priorities about how to teach about propaganda. Digital and media literacy competencies are needed not only to strengthen people's capacity to use information for personal and social empowerment, but also for addressing potential risks associated with mass media and digital media. Different countries address the themes of protection and empowerment at particular time periods based on ongoing national dialogues. For example, media literacy was conceptualised with the frame of empowerment in 2011 after the Arab Spring led to enthusiasm among educators and academics about the democratic potential of social media (Mihailidis, 2011). In Belgium, protectionist concerns about radicalisation increased dramatically in the months following the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2106, which led to competing opinions about the problem of radicalisation in Belgium (Figoureux and Van Gorp, 2020). In Germany, a protectionist frame was evident in the months leading up to the passage of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018, the toughest privacy and security law in the world, which offers a firm stance on data privacy and security that shifts decisively away from a focus on vulnerable audiences towards a broader conceptualisation of information rights (Savirimuthu, 2020).

For these reasons, the Mind Over Media team recognised the value of adding country-specific lesson plans that enabled educators to explore topics of particular relevance to their national context. Comparing the lessons from Finland and Romania elucidates some important differences in priorities regarding how protection and empowerment are understood, with different ways of considering issues of social responsibility. In Finland, educators wanted students to understand that there are Finnish laws that limit some online marketing practices that take advantage of people's vulnerability to propaganda. In Finland, with WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube being used daily by 70 per cent of the population (Statista, 2020), many high school students are quite familiar with social media influencers, and some have strong positive

opinions about them. There, a number of young YouTubers have created personal brands, and media literacy educators have introduced the subject of influence marketing to their students.

As part of the Mind Over Media project, Sonja Hernesniemi of the Finnish Society on Media Education developed a workshop for teens where students explore the commercial side of YouTube content production and influence marketing. In her workshop with teens, Sonja uses a Walk the Line warm-up activity where students indicate their opinions on several statements about influence marketers. Students who agree with the statement stand on an imaginary line in the classroom, with 'strongly agree' at one end of the line and 'strongly disagree' at the other end. They volunteer to share their opinions by agreeing or disagreeing to a variety of statements, including such examples as: 'Influencers on YouTube are more trustworthy than people who don't promote products on their channel' (Media Education Lab, 2016).

This activity gives students a playful way to share their ideas about a topic, while helping the teacher increase knowledge of students' existing attitudes and beliefs. In other activities, students learn key marketing and advertising terminology, and discuss the ethical and legal boundaries of advertising. Working in small groups, students analyse a marketing case in which the Council of Ethics in Advertising in Finland received a complaint about the lack of fiscal transparency of an online content provider. In a simulation activity, small groups learn more about influence marketing by playing one of three roles: a business or company that wants to promote products using influence marketing, a YouTube content provider, or a multichannel network organisation of YouTube content providers. During this activity, the groups research and evaluate the marketing process from the perspective of their assigned role. After gathering information online, they share their insights with the whole group (Media Education Lab, 2016). The study of influence marketing inevitably leads to deeper ethical questions about the practice of monetizing relationships and selling authenticity, a topic with substantial relevance to propaganda.

The Romanian curriculum offers a special lesson on nationalist propaganda. Media literacy educator Nicoleta Fotiade, the founder of Mediawise Society, developed this activity after reading a quote from a historian who commented on Romanian culture: 'Due to tradition and custom, but also to insistent propaganda, the Romanians seem to be more attracted by symbols specific to national cohesion and authority than to those characteristic of democratic life' (Boia, 2001). Nationalist propaganda frames social problems by appealing to simple narratives and myths, which bypass reasonable deliberation and critical thinking. It often finds an 'other' to blame as justification for present or future actions.

In the lesson, students learn how propaganda techniques are used to stir both positive feelings towards one's country and negative emotions towards various social, cultural, or ethnic groups. Students reflect on the possible effects of nationalist propaganda upon socio-cultural groups, including exclusion, segregation, superiority, and even violence. In the activity, students first look at 6–8 different visual representations of liberty and unity from Romanian media across history, and discuss how people's needs and values can be given different meanings depending on their context, framing, and producer's political or ideological ideas. Students are asked to identify which examples might be labelled as nationalist propaganda. How could the propaganda have a negative impact on other social or cultural groups?

Then they view two different propaganda videos on the Mind Over Media Romania site. Each student uses a two-column notation system. In the left column, students write down all the emotions they believe were activated by each video. In the right column, students write down the specific groups of people or countries represented in each example. Students use

lines to connect the names of the emotions in the left column with the associated people, groups of people, or countries on the right column. They discuss how positive emotions are often used in relation to one's country, such as pride, unity, and safety; while negative emotions are activated towards other groups. Which are the possible consequences of such persuasive strategies? What are the downsides of blaming a cultural, national, or mysterious other? (Media Education Lab, 2016).

The lesson helps students reflect on nationalist propaganda that activates strong emotions of national pride, doubled by emotions of hatred, fear, or anger towards others considered 'outside' the national group. When media messages tap into audience needs for belonging, safety, unity, hope, and historical justice, they can be compelling. Students learn to be wary of media messages that attack cultural groups, foreigners, or mysterious others. They see how simple explanations of national identity with familiar historical or cultural narratives can substitute for examining the complex realities of social problems.

Propaganda education must be deeply situational and contextual in order to help students understand the carefully constructed nature of the media environments they inhabit. Instructional practices should centre not on the transmission of information, but on the development of dialogue and discussion skills that support the practice of strong-sense critical thinking, where intellectual humility is encouraged by increasing people's awareness of the partial and incomplete nature of knowledge (Paul, 1981). To illustrate the alignment between media literacy education and propaganda education, Table 29.1 offers some key concepts of media literacy as they apply to seven lesson plans from the American version of the Mind Over Media curriculum for high school students.

As is evident in the table, media literacy education pedagogy requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create. By expanding the concept of literacy to include all forms of media, media literacy education builds and reinforces skills for learners of all ages. Like print literacy, those skills necessitate integrated, interactive, and repeated practice. Media literacy education develops informed, reflective, and engaged participants essential for a democratic society, recognising that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialisation. Finally, media literacy educators affirm that people use their individual skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages (NAMLE, 2008).

Among the many insights that resulted from this four-year initiative, new questions about the pedagogy of propaganda education arise. In emphasising the value of learning to analyse both the potential benefits and harms of contemporary propaganda, researchers and teachers should continue to explore the value of the concept of *kairos* in helping learners understand the forms of propaganda they are likely to encounter on social media. *Kairos*, a concept that is often left out of rhetorical education at the high school level, conveys the idea that persuasive genres make adaptations and accommodations to convention even as they are 'uniquely uniquely timely, spontaneous, and radically particular' (Paul, 2014: 43). Conveying the importance of directing a persuasive message in the 'right way' at the 'right time', the concept of *kairos* has linked to the problem of moral relativism. Ancient Greeks believed that an exploration of *kairos* could help people determine whether expression was 'good or bad, honorable or dishonorable, based on its accordance with that particular moment' (Paul, 2014: 46). As a theory of both political speech and political action, the concept of *kairos* may offer some useful structure for exploring how context shapes both the construction of contemporary propaganda and its interpretation. Virtual encounters with the global 'other' may be transformative

Table 29.1   Media literacy theory aligned with high school lessons in contemporary propaganda

	Media literacy theory	Mind Over Media: lessons in contemporary propaganda
1	Media messages impact people's attitudes and behaviours.	What is Propaganda? Review different definitions of propaganda from multiples time periods and contexts. Identify some common themes and then create a personal definition that reflects the way you experience contemporary propaganda.
2	Production techniques are used to construct media messages.	Recognising Propaganda Techniques. Review diverse examples of contemporary propaganda to identify four persuasive techniques, including activating strong emotions, simplifying ideas, responding to audience needs, and attacking opponents.
3	The content of media messages contains values, ideology, and specific points of view.	To Share or Not to Share. Select 1 example of contemporary propaganda you would share to your social network, and 1 you would never share. Reflect on the potential benefits and harms that may result from the viral spread of propaganda.
4	Media messages are selective representations of reality.	Where Propaganda Can be Found. Find examples of contemporary propaganda in news and public relations, advertising and marketing, government and politics, activism, entertainment and education.
5	People judge the credibility of media messages using features like authority and authenticity.	Analyse Propaganda with Critical Questions. Analyse examples of contemporary propaganda by asking critical questions about the message that identify its author, purpose, and point of view. Consider how different features of propaganda can make it seem credible.
6	Authors create media for different purposes, shaping content to appeal to particular target audiences.	Talking Back to Propaganda. Create a video response to an example of propaganda after analysing it. By creating a short video response, you are using the power of image, language, and sound to convey your own important ideas.
7	Both authors and audiences add value to media messages as part of an economic and political system.	Keep Learning. Explore additional information resources to learn more about propaganda. Deepening your own knowledge of contemporary propaganda is excellent preparation for work, life, and citizenship.
8	Media messages use stereotypes to express ideas and information.	Reflect on Propaganda. Consider the stereotypes that people have about the term 'propaganda' and reflect on how your beliefs and attitudes about propaganda have changed as a result of your learning experience.

Sources: Adapted from Hobbs (2020) and Media Education Lab (2016).

pedagogies to help students gain metacognitive awareness about the limitations of their own interpretations of contemporary propaganda, helping to build respect for diverse perspectives (Hobbs et al., 2018).

Faced with the substantial challenges of reconciling the values of 'do no harm' in teaching with the rise of fake news in a polarised 'post-truth' landscape, media literacy educators naturally place a high value on logical reasoning and critical analysis. They recognise the value of identifying filter bubbles and confirmation biases. However, they also intuitively understand the limits of logical appeals and 'true facts' because they understand that social influence is created through feelings as well as facts. Focusing on contemporary propaganda provides plentiful opportunities to bring *logos*, *pathos*, *ethos*, and *kairos* into the classroom in ways that do not exacerbate perceptions of educational indoctrination or deepen political rifts within communities. Because the study of contemporary global propaganda provides opportunities to reflect on how the meaning-making process is situational and contextual, educators can comfortably use empowerment and protection strategies to cultivate multi-perspectival thinking and activate intellectual curiosity.

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