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## VOICES IN THE FIELD

### *Using Virtual Exchange to Advance Media Literacy Competencies through Analysis of Contemporary Propaganda*

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#### ABSTRACT

With the rise of so-called fake news as a global phenomenon, interest in propaganda analysis has advanced along with the recognition of the fundamentally social process of interpretation. In this essay, we explore the use of cross-national dialogue among German and American undergraduate students who are seeking to better understand how media messages are interpreted and how they inform and guide the civic actions of citizens. We describe and analyze five lessons that used a virtual exchange comprised of a variety of digital media platforms, texts, and technologies to support the cross-national study of contemporary propaganda. We observed that cross-national dialogue enables students to gain sensitivity to the role of cultural context in interpreting propaganda. Rather than conceptualize propaganda education as an ideologically benign set of context-free skills, pedagogies that include opportunities for cross-national dialogue foreground the importance of cultural specificity as a means to unpack the complex discursive context of propaganda as digital political communication.

**Keywords:** *media literacy, media competence, propaganda, university, college, undergraduate, curriculum and instruction, context, meaning, interpretation, education, Germany, United States*

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The strategic use of communication and information in order to sway public opinion has long been called propaganda and it has always been a significant area of interest for media and communication scholars. Although Edward Bernays (1928) took pains to define the ethical dimensions of the public communicator and the obligation to be truthful, the rise of polarizing political campaigns and partisanship in the 1920s led the distinguished communication scholar

Harold Lasswell (1927) to recognize that much propaganda “has a large element of the fake in it” (p. 206).

Since the U.S. presidential election in 2016, the rise of a supposedly new phenomenon called *fake news* has become a global issue. So far, only a small bit of empirical research on this topic has examined the influencing potential of fake news, in part because it has been so difficult to define (Edson, Lim, & Ling, 2018). Using statistical modeling, Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) examined the likelihood that American social media users were exposed to fake news in the months before the 2016 presidential election, finding that nearly everyone was exposed to it. The sheer amount of fake election news stories on social media and its numerical superiority over mainstream news in the days before the election shocked many (Silverman, 2016). Thus, it is hardly surprising that this phenomenon has not been limited to national contexts and boundaries. Several months before the German federal elections in autumn 2017, the debate about misleading information on social media platforms reached Europe. By that time, 74 percent of all Germans believed that fake news would play a key role in the chancellor’s election (Bitkom, 2017, p. 13). These numbers became even more worrying when looking at other statistics, which indicate that 42 percent of young German adults (age 14 to 24) feel it is difficult to identify fake news (LfM, 2017, p. 7).

Given the rise of so-called fake news as a global phenomenon, we wondered whether or not propaganda analysis could be used with German and American undergraduate students to build media literacy competencies. Cross-national dialogue among German and American undergraduate students may affect how learners understand how media messages are interpreted and how they influence civic actions.

In this essay, we report our experiences in designing and implementing a pilot project where we explored the use of a virtual exchange learning experience between German and American undergraduate students to discuss and analyze contemporary political propaganda. After reviewing the literature on propaganda, media literacy education and virtual exchange, we describe, analyze, and reflect upon the learning experiences we designed for undergraduate students in Germany and the United States. We hope our experiences may be valuable to other educational practitioners interested in exploring virtual exchange as a cross-disciplinary pedagogy to promote critical thinking about contemporary propaganda and inspire additional inquiry through research.

## **DEFINING PROPAGANDA IN THE CONTEXT OF FAKE NEWS**

The study of advertising and propaganda has long been a part of media literacy education and it is highly likely that the robust propaganda education programs that developed in the late 1930s in the United States had an influence on the later practice of media literacy during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in secondary English education (Hobbs & McGee, 2014). Today, the rising interest in so-called fake news encouraged the development of typologies and labeling systems to describe and define the many forms of such news circulating in the cultural environment. For example, in the United States, Wardle (2017) has offered a classification of seven types of misinformation and disinformation. The European Association of Viewers Interests (EAVI) identified ten types of misleading news in their poster entitled *Beyond Fake News*. This typology is designed to help learners develop a shared, precise vocabulary and to spark classroom debates and activities. The poster invites users to consider the motivation and the suspected impact on the target audience (EAVI, 2017). Other scholars recognize the

limitations of typologies and definitional framing (Jack, 2017), noting that the particular usage of various terms for misinformation and disinformation are historically and contextually situated.

Although we appreciate the value of developing typologies and precise language to describe the many types of problematic content that are circulating in contemporary culture today we consider the term *propaganda* to be a flexible, versatile, and overall more suitable term to refer to a wide range of messages that are intentionally constructed in order to influence the attitudes and behaviors of large groups of people. As scholars of propaganda have pointed out, the term propaganda does not necessarily have to be restricted to political contexts and totalitarian structures (Brown, 1963; Maletzke, 1972; Taithe & Thorton, 1999; Arendt, 2011). In a philosophical analysis of the epistemology and ethics of propaganda, Cunningham (2002) notes that because propaganda can be truthful or full of lies, its defining feature is its indifference to truthfulness. Bussemer (2008) concludes that in contemporary research there is a parallel existence of both narrow propaganda concepts referring to totalitarian political structures and of broader propaganda concepts describing propaganda as a ubiquitous phenomenon affecting all forms of society. For this reason, “propaganda analysis requires the scrutiny of the discursive context more than of individual texts” (Sproule, 1994, p. 335).

We use the term propaganda in its broadest sense, consistent with work of communication scholars during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lasswell, 1927; Jowett & O’Donnell, 2012). Our perspective corresponds with the definition of Taylor (2003), who argues that propaganda “is really no more than the communication of ideas designed to persuade people to think and behave in a desired way ... [by] persuading people to do things which benefit those doing the persuading, either directly or indirectly”. This definition conceptualizes propaganda as a neutral term implying that “propaganda can be used for ‘good purposes’ just as it can be abused” (p. 6).

Thus, the identification and evaluation of propaganda as beneficial or harmful activates a reflective, metacognitive stance (Hobbs, 2017). The same can be said about parody, satire and hoaxes as well as other types of so-called fake news. Because satire is a form of cultural commentary and critique (LeBoeuf, 2007), it can be also understood as a type of propaganda. The individual interpreter determines whether it is perceived as delightful and funny or offending and harmful. That is why sometimes even commercial advertising can “fall in the field of propaganda” (Lasswell, 1995, p. 13). Advertising is understood as propaganda when it is “designed to influence the receiver of the message toward the point of view desired by the communicator and to act in some specific way as a result of receiving the message” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2012, p. 151). Thus, because clickbait (attention grabbing headlines of articles designed to generate clicks) leads to increasing advertising revenues for the producers, it could be understood as a type of commercial propaganda.

Undoubtedly, the rise of new technologies has led to the acceleration in the distribution and sharing of digital content. Today, people are complicit in the viral spread of propaganda through simple practices of liking and sharing. Data scientists have found that 60% of social media content is shared without being opened (Gabiolkov, Ramachandran, Chaintreau, & Legout, 2016). As a result, educational curriculum materials emphasize the need for users to read or view content before sharing (Media Education Lab, 2018).

We see propaganda analysis as fundamentally a social process of interpretation that requires the interplay of multiple actors, preferably with diverse perspectives and worldviews.

As users “bridge the gap of truth” (Kosner, 2012) by sharing interpretations with others, they become “critical agents in the meaning making process” (Hobbs, 2013, p. 633). For these reasons, we suspect that dialogues across national and cultural borders may help foster skills of analyzing propaganda in ways that advance critical thinking and fill in information gaps with contextual knowledge.

### **THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE**

Virtual exchange programs connect people around the world so they can build relationships, entirely online through formal and informal activities. With the rise of networked computers, a number of educators and researchers have been interested in using digital media and technology to leverage cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and racial diversity as a means to stimulate learning. When learners are able “to actively construct knowledge by formulating ideas into words that are shared with and built upon through the reactions and responses of others” (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995, p. 4), they gain confidence in self-expression while appreciating the tentative and provisional nature of knowledge itself.

Online learning that includes robust dialogue between individuals may help foster opportunity for reflection, which is a feature that is not readily demanded in traditional university lecture settings. For such learning to be valuable, verbal exchanges among learners should occur during task engagement in ways that promote student perspective-taking (Bonk, Appelman, & Hay, 1996). Research has shown that, in virtual exchange programs, task properties, such as activity, setting, and teacher and learner roles are especially influential for intercultural learning (Müller-Hartmann, 2000). Thus, we conceptualize virtual exchange as an empowering process that enables learners to encounter the other in a safe environment while simultaneously reflecting upon one’s own culture and values. Ideally, the reciprocal nature of virtual exchange is rooted in a spirit of appreciation and respect.

Against this background it is desirable for education to develop concepts that foster media-related knowledge and experience and stimulate intellectual and social-moral development. In this sense, learning processes should foster digital and media literacy competencies by motivating intellectual curiosity, increasing respect for diverse interpretations, and advancing a tolerance for complexity. According to empirical research, complex tasks for problem solving, decision-making, creating and acting in a socially responsible way helps stimulate such learning processes (Tulodziecki, Herzig, & Grafe, 2018). Through exposure to this pedagogy, we expect that when people encounter propaganda that engages a strong emotional response, they will activate cognitive, social, and affective reasoning, reflecting on both their cultural positionality and the limits of their knowledge in the process of making an interpretation and judgment.

Based on these ideas about propaganda in the context of fake news and virtual exchange as supporting the goals of media literacy, we developed and implemented a set of learning experiences for undergraduate students in the United State and Germany.

### **CONTEXT OF THE COLLABORATION**

We brought together undergraduate education and communication students from Germany and the United States for online learning activities on the subject of contemporary

political propaganda in November of 2017. Students came from different academic disciplines and activities were designed to include synchronous and asynchronous exchange. German students from the University of Würzburg in Germany were enrolled in the initial teacher education program and American undergraduate students were enrolled in the communication studies major at the University of Rhode Island. A total of 21 students participated in the learning experience, including 9 American undergraduate students ranging in age from 20 to 25 and 12 German undergraduate students who ranged in age from 19 to 45.

The American students were studying the topic of propaganda throughout the whole semester in the context of the seminar entitled *COM 416 Propaganda*, a fully-online course taught by the first author. The German students were enrolled in a seminar entitled *Learning with and about Digital Media at School*, taught by the third author. This seminar included a total engagement period of six hours.

### Virtual Exchange Learning Experiences on Propaganda

We created five learning experiences to guide our collaboration, as shown in Table 1 which provides a summary of the learning activities in which discussions between German and US students took place. Note that the learning goals for each activity reference the fundamental competencies of media literacy, including the practices of accessing, analyzing, creating, taking action, and reflecting (Hobbs, 2010). These learning activities described below are conceptualized in relation to promoting cycles of information access, analysis, creation, reflection and action through the use of digital media texts, tools and technologies (Hobbs, 2017). All activities involved some use of digital platforms for expression and communication and each of the sessions was conceptualized according to the didactic principles of action-and-development-orientation (Tulodziecki, Herzig, & Blömeke, 2017, p. 65), a term that reflects the “ideal-typical structure of teaching” (155) in which the use of “complex stimulating tasks” (p. 131) is a major feature. To access relevant content, German students used Moodle, a learning management system, and American students used a WordPress platform for the delivery of supportive material and information.

Table 1  
*Learning Activities*

	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Learning Goal</b>	<b>Technology Use</b>
1	<b>What We Learned About Propaganda When We Were in School</b>	<i>Access.</i> Recognize the distinctive role of culture and education in how German and American students learn about propaganda in schools.	Using a digital bulletin board ( <a href="http://Padlet.com">Padlet.com</a> ), learners compose a response and select an image to accompany their work.
2	<b>Identify and Select Examples of Beneficial and Harmful Propaganda</b>	<i>Analyze.</i> Consider propaganda's capacity to offer social benefit or potential harm to individuals and society.	Using the Mind Over Media platform ( <a href="http://www.mindovermedia.eu">www.mindovermedia.eu</a> ), learners select or upload an example of propaganda, rate it, and comment.

3	<b>Comment on Political Campaign Ads</b>	<i>Analyze and Create.</i> Apply an analytic framework to consider how propaganda is designed to influence attitudes, knowledge and behavior	Using a digital annotation tool, Video Ant ( <a href="http://www.ant.umn.edu">www.ant.umn.edu</a> ), learners create and share a written interpretation and read the responses of other students.
4	<b>Comparing and Contrasting German and US Political Campaign Ads</b>	<i>Analyze and Act.</i> Compare and contrast two political advertisements from the 2016 German and US elections	Participate in a cross-national dialogue using a video conference tool ( <a href="https://zoom.us">Zoom.us</a> ).
5	<b>Reflection on Action</b>	<i>Reflect.</i> Consider the role of social context in interpreting contemporary global propaganda.	German students and American students debrief on the learning experience through discussion and writing activities.

## LESSONS AND ACTIVITIES

### Reflect on Propaganda Education in Childhood

In lesson 1, students were asked to examine and evaluate how school and education influenced the way in which they critically deal with propaganda. Students shared memories of their own experiences from back in school, but the question also demanded a response which made it necessary to carry out some in-depth research. Therefore, German students formed small groups in which they elaborated the basics for a task solution. These groups focused on (a) the examination of propaganda teaching sources, (b) the teaching of propaganda in international contexts, and (c) the curricula and subjects in which propaganda is taught at school. Findings were saved as digital entries on a Padlet wall. American students also shared their memories of learning about propaganda on a Padlet wall, and some students chose to use hyperlinks to access additional images videos, and information they had explored online.

As expected, we observed some differences in how German and American students learned about propaganda when they were students in elementary and secondary school. In Germany, propaganda is mainly taught in two subjects focusing on national contexts, German and History. As part of their coursework in Professor Grafe's course, students selected websites and links to content to show how the subject of propaganda was addressed during the high school years. One student mentioned the film, *Die Welle* (The Wave), a 2008 German political thriller directed by Dennis Gansel. In the film, a teacher stages a social experiment where he sets up an autocracy and students fall into the lure of fascism with disastrous results. In general, because German students experience the study of propaganda mainly in the context of examining totalitarian regimes, it is not surprising that, when asked to explore the teaching of propaganda in other countries, they offered examples from North Korea.

By contrast, most American students learned about propaganda in the context of democratic political discourse and some were even able to recall vivid examples of hands-on, experiential learning. One student remembered, "When I was in fifth grade, we had a day where we had to reenact the Civil War. This taught us about the propaganda that was used to put the

North and the South at ends with each other. This was a creative way of showing the students what war time was like and how it leads to this out of control war within our country". Some students remembered learning about propaganda in middle school during the 2008 presidential election campaign. One student explained, "We looked at each candidate and their teams uses of propaganda and compared them". Another student remembers being asked to create some form of propaganda. The student recalls that some students were asked to create a poster and other students were asked to create a song, noting that "it was a very interesting assignment and really did a great job teaching us about what propaganda was and how effective it could be".

Some American students remember learning about propaganda in the context of studying the history of World War II. During these lessons, students learned how the U.S. government was attempting to persuade Americans of the need to enter the war. One student remembers analyzing propaganda that targeted young men, aiming to "glorify the war and make it seem like a patriot's heroic duty".

Other students mentioned learning about propaganda specifically in relation to the Holocaust, viewing and discussing films including *The Boy In The Striped Pajamas*, the 2008 drama set in Berlin during World War II and directed by Mark Herman, which offers a child's perspective on the persecution of Jews. Some remember viewing and discussing *Schindler's List*, the 1993 historical drama directed by Steven Spielberg. Some students commented on the lasting emotional significance of these films. One student recalled, "Sometimes I will re-watch *Schindler's List* to remind myself about the difference one person can make in the world to encourage me when I am feeling low". Another even remembered learning about the Holocaust in the fifth grade (at the age of 10 or 11) by reading books, including *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry, a work of historical fiction about a Danish family trying to relocate to Sweden to avoid being deported to a concentration camp. The student remembers, "As a fifth grader this influenced my perception on Germany as a whole. This material being taught at that young age can be very harmful!".

A few American students took the opportunity in this assignment to reflect on education itself as a form of propaganda. Exposed to history textbooks, which present ideas about the founding of the country and omit information about the violation of human rights and other abuses of power, some students understood the textbooks' bias as a form of propaganda. One student wrote:

In most schools you do not learn about the violence Christopher Columbus committed, yet he's still regarded as this great explorer who discovered America. Topics such as the Trail of Tears, Japanese internment camps, and even the real complexities of slavery are skimmed over or never touched. Being vague or not covering these topics in school is a form of propaganda. Even omitted information can be dangerous and influential. It creates ignorance in young students about their own country's history. This helps people buy into propaganda for American nationalism because people won't know the truth.

By considering the many different ways in which the concept of propaganda was introduced to learners in Germany and the United States, students gained sensitivity to the role of cultural context in understanding and interpreting it.

### Evaluate Propaganda as Beneficial or Harmful

In lesson 2, students were encouraged to explore a variety of forms of international propaganda examples from the digital platform Mind Over Media: Analyzing Contemporary Propaganda, available at: [www.mindovermedia.eu](http://www.mindovermedia.eu). At this website, students are invited to rate the example on a five-point continuum from “beneficial” to “harmful.” Because the German students understood propaganda primarily in terms of its negative historical context, the idea that propaganda could be beneficial was a novel idea for them.

Students were asked to select examples of international propaganda from the digital platform Mind Over Media and offer a comment and a rating, judging whether they perceived a specific example to be beneficial or harmful. After users offer a judgment, the digital learning platform displays the results of all users who have rated the particular example, enabling users to compare their judgment to others. Figure 1 shows an example of a German political meme that was uploaded to the website. The individual who uploaded the artifact notes that the picture was found online on Facebook and Twitter and “posted by a member of the German right wing populist party AfD in the context of the parliamentary elections for the Bundestag in 2017. This propaganda piece activates emotions since it is clearly supposed to evoke memories from New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne, where a group of male migrants attacked and harassed numerous women. Media coverage proved that this picture is fake.”



Figure 1. German propaganda artifact shown with crowdsourced rating from Mind Over Media

German students were familiar with analyzing propaganda that was clearly defined as negative because the term propaganda itself is usually used in a negative context. One German student who analyzed the photo noted:

This is a very blatant example of Islamophobia and is definitely harmful to those who are merely observing a religious holiday. This plays into the fear people have of being

unfamiliar with a different religion. By connecting extreme sectors of a faith to all members, it is just trying to stir up fear.

Other learners were able to offer information about the blatant photo manipulation of the image. One explained it by providing links to authoritative sources:

The picture is evoked to raise memories of New Year's Eve in Cologne due to the use as meme. It is photoshopped and not a Cologne picture. Original picture shows Lara Logan, the CBS reporter who was sexually assaulted by a mob in Cairo's Tahrir Square (see <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/MindMoodNews/cbs-reporter-lara-logan-opens-tahrir-square-assault/story?id=13492964>). Logan's head is cut off in the propaganda pic, instead of it you see the one of glamour model Danica Thrall (see <http://www.haz.de/Nachrichten/Politik/Deutschland-Welt/AfD-hetzt-mit-gefaelschtem-Foto-im-Internet>).

In this activity, students immediately recognize the importance of context while evaluating the accuracy of the information contained in propaganda. Because the Mind Over Media platform displays the different evaluative judgments of users, students are visually reminded that different people interpret media messages differently, which is a key concept of media literacy education (Hobbs, 2010). In evaluating the potential benefits and/or harms of propaganda, people use information outside the text to inform their judgment.

German students were less familiar with the idea that propaganda could be beneficial, but when they uploaded examples, they chose examples that enabled them to indicate their critical sensibilities about it. For example, a German student uploaded an example of American propaganda from the *Indianarespect.com* website that promotes abstinence, part of the "It Can Wait" campaign. This example is shown in Figure 2. The ad's headline reads: "Her smile is not the only thing that's contagious. The ad explains that one in four sexually active teens has an STD so "the only sure way to stay safe is to choose not to have sex at all".

Students easily recognized that although the propaganda was intended to offer beneficial advice on sexual health, a focus on abstinence could also be understood as dangerous or harmful. According to the user who uploaded it, this creates "a false dilemma in which the only two options are no sex or STD". The campaign "demonizes people with STDs and creates fear. This is harmful because it does not educate about STD prevention or communication with a partner about sex".

This example produced widely varying responses from users of the Mind Over Media platform. As Figure 2 shows, website users had diverse interpretations of this artifact, with 33% of users perceiving it to be beneficial and 21% perceiving it to be harmful. One user wrote: "There is no logic in this. No information or helpful facts. The ad only wants to scare teens from having sex. It's not even promoting safe sex". Some users took a more nuanced view as in the case of another user who wrote, "This is kinda good because it raises awareness about STD/I, but at the same time it is harmful because it tells you the only way to stay away from them is to stay away from sex." Thus, online discussion of different interpretations of contemporary propaganda may enable learners to appreciate that the meaning of the message is not in the text, but in the context in which it is interpreted and understood.

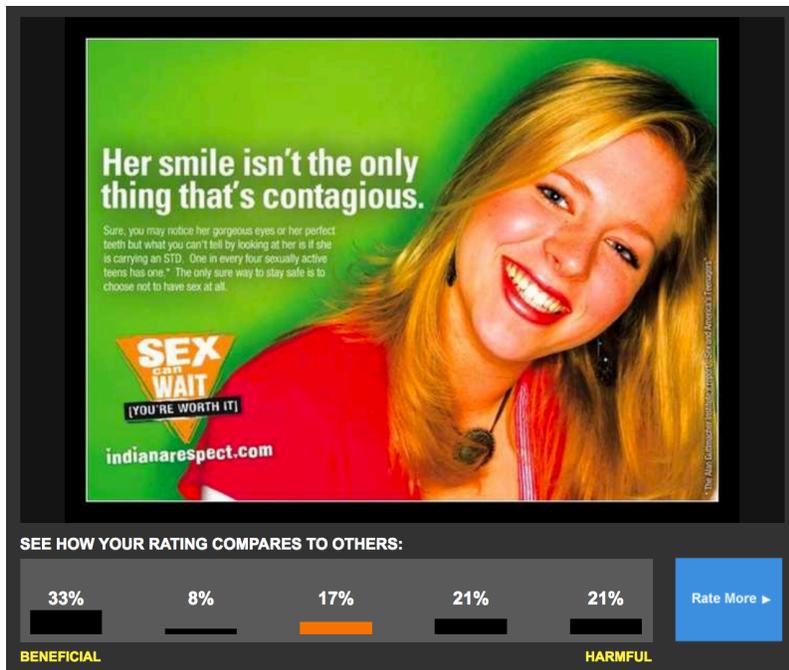


Figure 2. American propaganda artifact shown with crowdsourced rating from *Mind Over Media*

### Digital Annotation of Propaganda

In lesson 3, German and American students were asked to prepare and create video annotations on two propaganda examples sharing a German-American background. The first video was a Budweiser Super Bowl commercial, which aired during the 2017 Super Bowl and told a docudrama story of how Adolphus Busch arrived in the United States as a young immigrant from Germany and faced discrimination and challenges before meeting his St. Louis brewing partner. The ad concludes with the tag line, “When nothing stops your dream”. The second video, found on YouTube and produced by a neoconservative group called Secure America Now, was published days before the US presidential election in 2016. The video portrayed a fictional scenario in which Germany had been taken over by the Islamic State. Created with a series of still images that had been obviously manipulated, this video featured a narrator who offered a mock-serious but humorous depiction of changes to German culture that would result of the purported takeover, including a pork-free Oktoberfest. Figure 3 displays the two videos as displayed on the video annotation tool.

Learners accessed these video links through a free web-based software (VideoAnt) of the University of Minnesota which enables users to add annotations and comments, linking their comments to a time slider that displays the comments while the video is playing. The use of this web-based software enabled students of both countries to work together in an asynchronous way. German students organized themselves in groups that focused on the different questions students should ask every time they engage with contemporary propaganda. Table 2 shows the questions thematically framed to identify five components: message, techniques, means of communication and format, representation and audience receptivity.

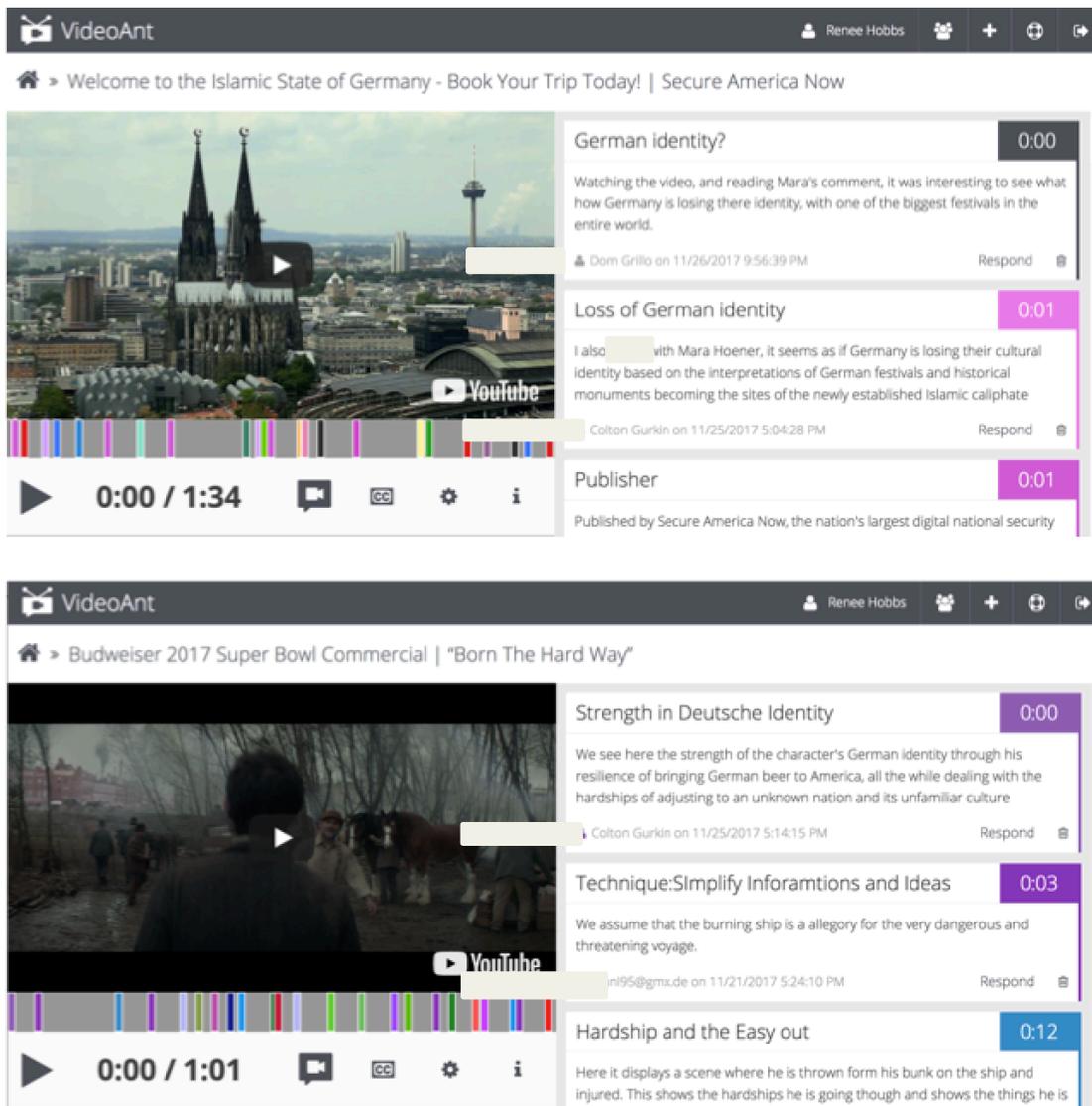


Figure 3. *Critical analysis of propaganda using Video Ant digital annotation platform*

19 German and American students analyzed two videos using the VideoAnt digital annotation platform and produced 49 comments and annotations that we reviewed. At first glance, it seemed that both nationalities had come to similar interpretations of the propaganda. Both groups concluded that the *Budweiser Advertising* narrative story of the new immigrant Adolphus Bush represents the values anchored in the idea of the American Dream. Students recognized how the activation of strong emotions was a major technique realized through the depiction of hardships faced by the protagonist as he arrives in the United States. Students also easily recognized *The Islamic State of Germany* as a form of satire by all groups. The portrayed scenes were so exaggerated that it became clear that the video shows a fictional scenario. Students also agreed that the message behind the satire clip is meant “to deter pro-refugee sentiment in Western countries,” as one American student expressed it.

However, a closer look at the annotations revealed that in addition to the global meaning and understanding of these propaganda pieces, German and American students brought in specific context knowledge that shaped their interpretation of the artifacts and contributed to a more informative, in-depth discussion. Many American students concluded quickly that the Budweiser Super Bowl commercial was clearly a reaction to Donald Trump's visa ban targeting citizens of Muslim countries, which was enacted a few days before the video was released. Many German students did not know about how the two events were chronologically connected. In turn, Germans recognized many local and national details presented in the *Islamic States of Germany* satire that Americans were unfamiliar with, such as the depiction of the Balkan Route as the preferred route to enter Europe illegally or the portrait of the terrorist that attacked people on a local train to Würzburg in 2016. This learning experience was powerful for learners, because the opportunity to share contextual knowledge with people from another country demonstrates that an individual's interpretation of propaganda is bound up with the particularities of local context and culture.

**Table 2**  
**Questions for Analyzing Propaganda**

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**Message:** What key information and ideas are being expressed?

**Techniques:** What symbols and rhetorical strategies are used to attract attention and activate an emotional response? What makes them effective?

**Means of communication and format:** How does the message reach people, and what form does it take?

**Representation:** How does this message portray people and events? What points of view and values are activated?

**Audience receptivity:** How may people think and feel about the message? How free are they to accept or reject it?

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SOURCE: Media Education Lab (2018)

**Compare and Contrast German and American Political Propaganda**

Lesson 4 features a synchronous video chat using the Zoom video conference tool. Due to the time difference, German students participated in the chat during their normally scheduled time period from their classroom and American students participated from their homes. For American students, the learning experience was optional and students received extra credit for participating in the 90-minute program. We focused on contemporary political propaganda as students of both countries were presented with a complex task in which they were asked to view, discuss, examine and evaluate differences and similarities in the interpretations of German and American political propaganda. The American example was a campaign commercial entitled, *Donald Trump's Argument for America*, which was uploaded to YouTube on November 6, 2016, only a few days before the presidential election. The other video was part of the election campaign of the AfD, the German populist party in the context of the 2017 parliamentary elections. Entitled, *Alice Weidel Alexander Gauland AfD Alternative für Deutschland Campaign TV ad (English subtitles)*, it portrayed the two party leaders and gave insights into their political careers and aims using a combination of still and moving images with voiceover from the

political candidates addressing such topics as unemployment, the European Union and immigration.

In small synchronous discussion groups, students were asked to compare and contrast the two political campaign videos. Figure 4 displays an image from the recorded video conference. For about half of the session, students worked in small groups, which enabled them to have a dialogue with three to six individuals, ensuring that all voices could be heard. In their dialogues, they identified many content-related similarities in the German and American political campaign propaganda. The students recognized that the Trump ad and the AfD ad both blamed the leaders of the past for their failed policies. They recognized that both ads urged viewers to be fearful of immigrants and refugees, playing upon fears in order to attract insecure voters. Both groups recognized the use of color, music, and other formal features to attract and hold attention. One student said, “We found that both videos address fears ...about losing identity, losing control over their borders, losing importance...both videos suggest that the main reason for the problem is that established politicians...didn’t really care about the people”.



Figure 4. *Virtual exchange learning experience on the Zoom videoconference platform*

American students perceived that the German AfD ad introduced an aggressive tone of accusation. Students recognized that both videos promote a sense of nationalism. One student summarized the discussion by noting that both ads used “the us-versus-them mentality that positioned migrants as the common enemy” and that such a pose was “hiding xenophobia under the guise of bravery,” encouraging people to stand up and be courageous enough to vote one’s conscience. While the AfD ad featured a lot of visuals on the candidates themselves, the Trump ad “showed Americans showing support for him, a lot of imagery of American culture”. One student suggested the two campaign ads were “spookily similar,” with similar use of a “determined tone” and dramatic stark lighting. Students noted that the German video used black-

and-white, while the Trump video used a green film over certain images to communicate a darker, more negative tone.

As students discussed these two videos, however, we observed that the information asymmetry between American and German students became more noticeable as German students were familiar with American politics due to its visibility on German television and society. American students, however, were unfamiliar with even basic knowledge about German politics. Some did not recognize the name of the German chancellor, Angela Merkel. Although this might sound like a clear disadvantage, it turned out to be valuable for promoting dialogue. Both German and American students who lacked information came up with questions that were answered by other students, which led to new questions and other contexts. For example, one American student said, “My German friends clarified for me that in the ad, the other candidates are considered mainstream” and a German student noted that the AfD was considered a “nationalist position.” One American asked, “Were there unflattering images of the German opposition candidates?” and a German student answered by noting that the images of Chancellor Merkel were fleeting and not particularly negative, but that whenever she appeared on screen during the ad, the verbal message described a failed or ineffective policy. They were not as repetitively negative as the American campaign’s relentless focus on the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton.

When discussing the way that Alice Weidel is depicted in the German video, the class examined one particular image of the candidate. Someone asked, “Does she come across as judgmental to German voters?” A German student responded, saying, “She has presented herself as being quite arrogant and strict,” and then he described a televised political news event where Weidel aggressively left the talk show when she was provoked. According to one German student, “the images communicate the idea that she is a business woman, very tough and knows how to handle difficult things.” For American students, this additional contextual information filled in the gaps for American students. This sparked a fruitful and expanding discussion where occurring information gaps were closed due to the mutual sharing of contextual knowledge.

### **Reflect on the Learning Experience**

Lesson 5 provided an open discussion forum for students to reflect on the learning experience. German and American students did this in the context of their face-to-face class while American students reflected in their online class using the Zoom platform for synchronous dialogue. Writing activities were also used by American students as a means to reflect on the learning experience.

In reflecting on the learning experience, some new questions arose. A German student wondered whether the satire about ISIS in Germany could be misunderstood by some people, asking, “Do you know people who personally believe that Germany is being taken over by Muslims?” Students agreed that although no one who saw the video satire “would consider Germany an Islamic caliphate, the videos [when] looked at today reveal global issues that affect the whole world,” as issues of immigration and monetary concerns are relevant to many countries. Such misunderstandings could occur, an American student pointed out, because “having to analyze messages where you don’t know the context is so difficult because you can only analyze at a surface level.”

In this session, the learning goals were reviewed. To facilitate dialogue, German participants were split up into two groups of six students each, whereas American students joined the video session individually with their own digital device. Students then viewed both videos in

order to make sure that there would be common ground for interpretation. For the comparison-contrast discussion, students split into three groups containing eight to nine students (and one of the three authors) observing each group. Each team generated some insights on the similarities and differences between the two political ads and student analysis was shared, presented, and discussed in the virtual plenum.

American students were invited to reflect on the video chat experience in a synchronous online class on December 6, 2017. They reflected on the risks of information asymmetry and the gaps in our own knowledge. Students ended the semester with a greater awareness of the power of propaganda and especially around our tendency to fall victim to simple messages with strong emotional potency. “It comes down to context,” said one student. “In the political realm, prior knowledge and a historical background knowledge... can help you not become gullible enough not to fall for it.” Another student pointed out that because propaganda panders to audience fears and insecurities, “it is difficult to resist.” Another student said, “Awareness is a form of intellectual protection.”

## DISCUSSION

In this project, we addressed the question: How can virtual exchange dialogues about contemporary propaganda foster media literacy competencies? In describing and analyzing the learning experiences we used and the evidence of student learning we found, we are optimistic about the potential of cross-cultural dialogue to advance learning by deepening student understanding of context as a component of the meaning-making process. Through video chat, digital annotation and other forms of digital collaboration, students developed a more elaborated and sophisticated understanding of propaganda and this study showed that the use of digital collaboration tools helped students perceive themselves as knowledgeable about propaganda and able to deploy critical and analytic perspectives in responding to a variety of familiar and unfamiliar media texts.

Through the use of digital and experiential pedagogies, students positioned themselves as active participants in their own learning. Digital interaction enabled them to express and share diverse opinions across two continents. Since students developed a more nuanced understanding of what was important for propaganda analysis, we believe that these interactions led to a modification of internal conditions relevant for the present and future activities of the students. The process of re-watching and slowing down videos in order to create video annotations may have helped students develop increased awareness of propaganda techniques and message content. It is possible that the use of digital tools played a crucial role in supporting cross-cultural dialogue about digital propaganda.

Learning is a profoundly social phenomenon. Pedagogies that make use of cross-national dialogue provide opportunities for learners to acquire confidence in interacting with people across the full range of ever-shifting learning communities that exist in the world outside the classroom. Future research is needed to better understand and measure the value of digital learning and cross-national dialogue about contemporary propaganda. Students in communication and education naturally have different academic backgrounds, prior experiences, and interests that may have affected the overall learning experience. Additionally, students enrolled in a media literacy and communication course may be more interested in the analysis and critique of propaganda examples than a general student population.

Today, educators are observing a rise of peer-to-peer learning as “everyone learns from everyone”. Youth are more involved in their own self-presentation, learning, and evaluation of information sources, reflecting what Chávez and Soep (2005, p. 409) have called a “pedagogy of collegiality” that characterizes multi-vocal dialogue and collaboration. Careful scrutiny of the discursive context of media messages can be advanced through cross-national dialogue.

The use of virtual exchange learning experiences foregrounds and showcases the importance of cultural specificity and context in the interpretation and analysis of propaganda. Future research should use comparative research designs and data analysis to explore the value of multinational pedagogical learning experiences and how they may advance propaganda education. As citizens in a democracy, people need practice exchanging ideas with diverse others, sharing cross-cultural contextual knowledge as we “have conversations, share ideas, and listen to each other as a means to find truth” (Hobbs, 2013, p. 637).

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